

Robert Pruett

Biography

This autobiography was composed and written by Robert Lynn Pruett on death row in Texas.

It was typed out upon his request by Ines Aubert in Switzerland and others.

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Meet the Parents

Howard Steven Pruett, aka "Sam," was born on Friday December 13, 1946 in Corpus Christi, Texas. His mother, Christine, wasn't due to give birth until April of 1947, but on that fateful day, a gas line at a nearby gas company exploded, sending earthquake like tremors throughout the city, knocking her off of the stool she was standing on while cleaning in the kitchen. She was rushed to the hospital where she prematurely gave birth to my father. They said he was so tiny that he could fit into a shoe box.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Sam's family migrated from Oklahoma to Corpus Christi. His grandfather was a successful businessman, acquiring an oilfield equipment business, a trucking business, and various properties all over the Corpus Christi area. Sam's father, Dewey Sr., filed a lawsuit against his own father (reasons unknown) and was awarded a large portion of his assets. Sam entered a world that was financially secure, although he felt anything but safe growing up.

Sam felt like a fish out of water as a child. His great grandmother, who was rumored to have been a "holier than thou" religious fanatic, referred to him as a demon child and his mother echoed such acrimony every time he did something she considered sin, which was quite often from all accounts. He has often told me that he has been cursed or "snakebit" his entire life. As if to prove this, he points out that each of his names has six letters in it, symbolizing the number of the beast in Christian mythology (Revelations 13:18). In addition, he said being born on Friday the 13th was a portent that he'd have the life he has had. Of course he said all of this facetiously, but I wonder if he once believed it?

He certainly didn't dispel any notions his mother had about him with his behavior. When he was four years old he was out playing in their chicken coop, trying to catch baby chicks, when a rooster chased him away. Undeterred, he reentered the coop brandishing a hammer and began smashing the chicks' heads in as he caught them. His grandmother saw him doing this and yelled for him to stop, but he just looked at her and continued on until the rooster ran him out of there again. His mother snatched him up and beat him black and blue, reminding him that he was a sinner destined for hell. After his father

returned home from work, he gave him more of the same, driving his head through their Sheetrock ceiling.

Dewey Sr. was a World War II veteran and a well-respected businessman in his community. At home, however, he was a violent alcoholic prone to physically and mentally abusing his family, with a special interest in his youngest, Sam. When Sam was six years old, he had an old coon dog that came up missing. Sam figured that the dog ran away, leaving him alone with the crazies. A few days passed before a horrible stench began emanating from under their house. His father investigated and located where the dog had crawled under to die. Upon locating the source of the foul smell, Dewey Sr. hollered for Sam. "Sam, get your ass over here front and center." "Yes, sir?", "that dumb dog of yours done went off and got himself bit by a snake and died under my house. Take them clothes off and get your ass under there and get him out. Don't need you getting your clothes dirty and full of fleas, so get 'em off," he ordered. With tears in his eyes, Sam reluctantly started removing his clothes. Watching all of this, his older brother Leroy spoke up and said he'd do it, but their father was adamant that it would be Sam. Naked, Sam crept to the body of his dead dog, grabbed it, and then pulled it out. His father immediately yanked him up by the arm and carried him to their pool, then heaved him into the water with a laugh. "That'll wash the fleas off of you, boy!"

Sam was the youngest of five children. He had three brothers - Dewey Jr., Bill, and Leroy - and one sister, Lema. He felt closer to Lema than anyone. When someone would come down hard on him, she'd be there to console him and shower him with love. He thought that it was them against the world. When she married and moved away, he was devastated. In his mind she had abandoned him, and he fostered a deep resentment for her because of it. Later in life he forgave her, but he told me he was still upset at her until the day she died. He never stopped loving her.

After Lema moved away, Sam began getting into serious trouble. He and a friend stole a truck when they were 10 years old. He stood on the seat steering, while his buddy pushed the gas and break pedals at his orders. The police brought him home to his mother and she told them to take him away because she couldn't control him any longer. He was sent to Reform School, a place he was in and out of until he turned 17, when he "graduated" (as he fondly recalls it) to the penitentiary.

Sam also enjoyed a rapport with Leroy. They weren't as close as he and Lema, but they got along well. He always spoke highly of Leroy, proudly saying that he was the only Pruett to ever finish high school. This inspired me for a time, I even told him that I'd follow in Leroy's footsteps and finish high school to make him proud.

When Leroy was six years old he was outside playing under their car and fell asleep. His mother had errands to run and she climbed into the car without noticing him. As she pulled out of the driveway, she ran over his head. How it didn't bust is beyond me! They

said he was alright at the hospital, but he complained of migraine headaches the rest of his life.

Just after his 18th birthday, Leroy locked himself in the bathroom with a plastic bag and hose. They found him sitting on the toilet with the bag over his head and the hose inside of it running to the gas heater. His suicide note said that he just couldn't stand it anymore. Whether or not he was alluding to the migraine headaches or something else remains a mystery.

At the funeral, Sam's mother stared at him with disgust, pointed her finger in his face, and ignorantly blamed him for Leroy's death. She said that Leroy killed himself because Sam couldn't stay out of trouble. Later, his father hugged him and assured him that it wasn't his fault, that his mother was just upset.

I asked my father if there were other moments when his father expressed his affection. He replied, "When we was kids we'd go driving and us kids would be in the backseat, our folks up front. My brothers and me would get to playing, making a lot of noise, and the old man would say, 'Give me some face!' and they'd shove my face over the seat so he could slap the piss out of me." He said it was funny to him, that he laughed with everyone afterwards. There must've been something between my father and his father. Sam was the only one that cried at his funeral.

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My mother's past is shrouded in obscurity. With the exception of her mother, Allowee, I know little about her side of the family. As a small child, I recall meeting her siblings. We once visited her relatives in Alabama while passing through, but I have little recollection of them. I've attempted to pluck information and anecdotes from her about her past and family history, but I was mostly unsuccessful. My father said her family shunned her when she married him, that they were all "squares" and didn't want anything to do with our kind. Nevertheless, I've managed to gather some information from her.

Marcia Gail Manstein was born on October 9, 1950 in Houston, Texas. Her father, Jimmy, was an alcoholic who physically abused his wife until she couldn't take it any longer and divorced him six months after my mother's birth. As a result, my mom didn't meet her father until she was 12 years old.

Marcia's mother worked various jobs in order to provide for her and her older sister, Linda. She married a man named Frenchie when my mom was a toddler and he eased her burden with his help. They separated when my mom was eight years old.

George Kelly entered their world when my mother was nine years old. Her mother married him and moved into his home with her two girls. She still worked odd jobs, but

it really wasn't necessary because George had plenty of money from his own endeavors. According to my mother, George was a good man who took care of them. She only encountered trouble with him once when he whipped her with a razor strap. Her mother found out about it, told him that he had better not ever touch her kids again, and that was that.

George and Allowee had two children together, Lloyd and Marie. My mother said George loved her and Linda, but it was apparent to them that they weren't his children. According to my mother, he gave Lloyd and Marie anything they wanted while she and Linda had to work for what they wanted.

From all accounts, Marcia was a good kid who rarely got into trouble. I asked her to tell me the worst thing she ever did as a kid. She said that she took one of her mother's rings to school and sold it to another girl for a bag of potato chips. Her mother found out about it, retrieved the ring, then grounded her.

Before I resume my narrative, a brief excursus on mental function and heredity is required. To say that every infant's mind is a tabula rasa at birth, completely malleable by the environment, without any significant innate programming, is ludicrous. Yes, the environment plays an enormous role in shaping and forming our personalities, but there are other factors that must be considered.

Think about it for a second. Reflect back to elementary school and consider the kids in your 1st or 2nd grade class. Remember how some kids were fast learners, others slow, and the majority somewhere in the middle? Or how about your own siblings? You grew up in the same household with them. Are you the same? Are you of equal intelligence? Parents with more than one child detect differences in their children from a very early age. Some are introverts, others are extraverts; some excel in math, it's impossible to comprehend to others; some are mechanically inclined, while others need help changing a light bulb. We all have different capacities and we can't all become astrophysicists.

With the exception of the politically motivated, the scientific community acknowledges a genetic link to mental capacity. Empirical studies by behavioral scientists such as Robert Plomin (DNA markers associated with high versus low IQ: The quantitative trait loci project. *Behavior Genetics*, 24,107-118), J. Daniels (Molecular genetic studies of cognitive ability, *Human Biology*), and Thomas Bouchard (his famous twin study at the University of Minnesota) demonstrate this incontrovertibly.

That mental capacity has a genetic link is apparent in my family. I would surmise that there's some sort of genetic anomaly on the XX chromosomes on the maternal side, that

progressively reduces mental capacity with each generation. My grandmother and mother both exhibited difficulty processing information and both had memory problems. For years I attributed this characteristic in my mother to years of drug abuse, but my father says that she often lost her paycheck when he first met her and encountered the same mental challenges back then, before she started getting high. My sister was determined mentally retarded by HISD and qualified to receive a government check (SSI). Her youngest girl (I haven't been around her first three children since they were babies, I have no comment on them) possesses a similar mental capacity and she, too, receives a monthly SSI check and attends special education classes. Undoubtedly, heredity has effected the mental capacity on the maternal side of my family.

The above wasn't intended to offend or belittle anyone. It's difficult for me to write such things because I love my family very much, but I think it's essential to the story.

Sam was sent to prison in Texas at age 17 for escaping from Reform School and stealing a car. He was released a couple of years later and decided to head out to California to stay with his brother Bill, who was stationed at Edward's Air Force base. While there, Bill advised him to see an Army recruiter he knew about joining the service. He met with the recruiter who informed him that he couldn't formally join the Army because he had been to prison, but he could get him drafted if he passed a physical. He passed it and was drafted. Two weeks later he was sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana for basic training.

While Sam was undergoing basic training, his mother and her new husband, Burt Johnson, moved from Corpus Christi to Houston. Upon completion of basic training, Sam traveled to Houston "on leave" to visit them.

Around this same time Marcia was 16 years old, in the 10th grade, and working at a fast food restaurant. Sam went in to eat one day, struck up a conversation with her, and eventually built up the nerve to ask her out on a date. Both tell me that they fell in love with each other at first sight and knew that they would always want to be with each other. Her step-father, George, told her that Sam was too old (he was 20), that a soldier was only after one thing, and he forbade her from seeing him. It all went in one ear and out of the other.

Sam's leave was up shortly after he met my mother. He received orders to report to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for Advanced Artillery Training. Before he left, he told Marcia that he'd be back before she knew it and he promised to call her. She promised to wait for him.

The day he called, she picked up the phone crying. Alarmed, he asked her if she was okay. She said her mother had beaten her up and that she was tired of living at home. He

told her to gather some clothes and personal belongings and he'd meet her at a rendezvous. He went AWOL (Absent With Out Leave).

After he picked her up, they drove to his sister's house. Sam asked Lema if it was cool for them to stay until they got on their feet and she said it was okay. A couple of weeks later, they were married at the VA hospital in Houston by a retired Army Chaplain.

About a year later Sam was apprehended. They sent him to a stockade at Fort Hood, Texas to await court-martial. Before he could be court-martialed, his father died and the commanding officer allowed him to go to the funeral.

He received orders to report back to Fort Hood after his father's funeral. They reprimanded him for going AWOL, then stationed him at Fort Hood. A month later, he was granted a leave to drive to Houston and move my mother into a trailer just off of the base.

Marcia became pregnant several months later. Dad said she was so small back then that she couldn't carry the baby and had a miscarriage. I've asked them if drugs had anything to do with her losing the baby? My father said they weren't getting high back then, while my mother said she has been getting high since she was seventeen. Both agree that not long after the miscarriage, they were getting high daily.

Several weeks after Marcia lost the baby, Sam decided to go AWOL again. He said he was depressed about the miscarriage and his father's death; additionally, he wasn't making enough money in the Army to support Marcia and himself, and that was stressing him out. As a result, they loaded up their stuff and drove off into the night.

A year passed before they caught him again. Once again, he was returned to the stockade at Fort Hood. This time he was afraid that they'd execute him because he went AWOL during the Vietnam war, and, back then, going AWOL during wartime was a capital offense. The military was sympathetic with Sam's plight; they gave him an Honorable Discharge and told him to leave.

As was the case most of their lives, Sam and Marcia were dirt poor in the late 1960's. Both were uneducated (Marcia dropped out of school in the 10th grade; Sam refused to go to school while in Reform School, the highest grade he completed was the 5th) and had to survive on minimum wage. Sam's cousins inherited all of his father's assets and money, and neither of their parents wanted to help them, so they struggled to make ends meet. Life became even more complicated in 1969 when Marcia got pregnant again.

On November 22, 1969, my mother gave birth to Howard Jr. and everyone called him Steven. Feeling the added pressure to provide for his family, Sam resorted to his old ways: stealing and robbing. When he was arrested and sentenced to prison for burglary in March of 1970, my mother was left alone to take care of Steven.

Every time Sam went to prison, Marcia endured his absence, did what was necessary to survive, then took him back when he was released. She did see other men while he was

inside, but her heart remained with him. He understood. Never once did he say a word about the men she was with while he was in prison. Not in my presence, anyway.

In the latter part of 1971, while Sam was in prison, Marcia met a man named Cecil Barber at work. He moved in with her and pitched in to help take care of Steven, but he jumped ship as soon as she became pregnant.

Tammie Ann was born on August 26, 1972. Working odd jobs and receiving a little help from her mother, Marcia held the fort down until Sam was freed in late 1972.

Both of my parents admit that they were using a lot of drugs during this period. My dad said they smoked marijuana and he'd inject anything he could break down into a syringe. Consequently, the details surrounding this era are vague, although I have been able to ascertain some facts.

After Sam was released in 1972, he moved my mother and siblings close to Lema and her family, which had rapidly grown. She had 8 children with Wayne McLain (the same man she married and moved off with when Sam was a boy), 4 boys and 4 girls, before they separated in the early 1970's. When Sam moved his family next to her in 1972, she was passing hot checks to support her family. He teamed up with her until he went back to prison in June of 1974 for burglary. Afterwards, my mother partnered up with Lema, passing hot checks to keep groceries in the house and clothes on the kids' backs, until they were arrested in late 1974 and sent to prison.

Steven and Tammie were forced to stay with grandma Kelly, while Lema's children were sent to foster homes all over the place. My mother spent a year in TDC and then lived with her mother until she could get back on her feet. She then moved to the east side of Houston with a man named Mitch.

Sam was released from prison in 1977. Upon hearing that Lema was living in Corpus Christi, he loaded his family up and headed her way. He found a good job working in a pipe yard where he made enough money for him and his family to live comfortably. From all accounts, life was great for my family during this period.

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The following story is one that I've attempted to tell numerous times, but I've butchered it badly each time, so I've decided that the best way to tell it is to transcribe it straight from the source. This account was extracted verbatim from a letter my father sent to me dated March 11, 2003:

"Okay, we were living in Corpus, had moved down there in the same trailer park with Lema and her bunch. Steven was 7 or 8, Tammie 5 or 6. Ronnie (Lema's son) was locked up in the juvenile shelter, and me and Lema went to his trial. I seen an opening for him

to leave and he ran out the front door, me and Lema picked him up down the street. He was sent to Florida, Ft. Myers Beach, to stay with his daddy.

"Tommy Lynn showed up in this Camero and we decided to go to Houston, get a place to live, come back for your mom, brother and sister, but instead when we got to Houston, we began robbing 7-11s and Stop-n-Gos. We then took off for Florida, found Ronnie and hung out down there for awhile. Our intentions were to go back to Texas to get your mom and them, but while we were sitting at a bus station to come back, Ronnie took a walk and showed up with a brand new Jeep.

"So we took off, and that's when we started our robbery spree across the USA. Chris and Nancy (Lema's children) were both married and living in Tennessee, so we went thru there. Ronnie and Tommy robbed James Allen's (Nancy's husband) dad's house while I was eating at Nancy's. James' dad came over saying a neighbor saw Ronnie and Tommy around his place, so I told him if they robbed his house and show up here, I'll make sure to get the stuff back for you. He said, 'it's too late, I already called the police.' So I said fuck it, ran out the door, jumped in the jeep as soon as they showed up, and we took off. Do you know the police stopped us on the way out of that town and asked if we been breaking into houses? We said no, we just moved from Florida, just passing thru. He looked in the jeep, saw all the stolen shit, then told us we could go! I laughed so hard it hurt.

"Then I decided from there, let's go to Missouri where Bill lived in Kansas City. We couldn't find his place so we just pulled into a taco stand and robbed it, then headed west. Should have headed south, but didn't, we drove from there to Denver. I was amazed at the mountains and we spent a couple of days there. Next we went to Vegas and robbed a couple places, then headed to Los Angeles. We got a motel there, Ronnie goes for a walk, comes back out of breath. He done jacked a drag queen and a whole bunch of his friends were runnin' after him! We jumped in the jeep and burnt off!

"We were on our way to Phoenix, really headed back to Texas for your mom, but the jeep broke down 30 miles from Phoenix. We hitched a ride into Phoenix and Ronnie stole us a car, we decided let's go back to Cali, but this time to San Diego, get a place there, then go get your mom and them. Well we pulled in at a roadside park about 10 o'clock at night, I'm asleep in the back seat and Ronnie decides to rob these old women. Well we burn off and headed to Yuma, Arz, almost to the state line, when they stopped us, police behind us and in front of us. They all jumped out and throwed down on us with their pistols and shotguns, locked us up."

Tommy and Ronnie received prison sentences in Arizona for robberies in that state while my father was extradited to Missouri where they convicted him of a robbery and gave him a 10 year sentence in June of 1979.

What my father failed to mention in his letter was that he left my mother in Corpus Christi while she was pregnant. He and Tommy told her that they were going to play a

few games of pool, that they'd be back later that night. She didn't see him again for seven years.

My Emergence into the Field

When the news of Sam's arrest reached Marcia, she was out of money, running out of food, her rent was overdue, and she was in her third trimester of pregnancy. Lema was still living next to her in the trailer park, but she was experiencing similar difficulties and couldn't help. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Marcia called her mother. Her mother told her that she and her kids could stay with her and George. Bus tickets were sent and they left Corpus Christi for Houston.

Marcia began having contractions before dawn on September 18, 1979. She was taken to St. Joseph's Hospital where she gave birth to me at approximately 9:50am. Upon my arrival, I frightened my mother and the hospital staff by having a violent asthma attack that nearly ended my life. They had to keep me on a respirator for the first 48 hours of my existence. I suffered from asthma until I was six years old, averaging several major attacks a year.

We lived with Grandma Kelly for about a year after my birth. While there, my mother divorced my father. She said she was tired of raising children alone while he visited penitentiaries. I suspect that her mother and George influenced her decision.

According to my brother, we lived in at least 10 places over the first three years of my life. Our mother went through several boyfriends during this period, the first being a man named Tony that she met while visiting her biological father at his apartment complex on the north side of Houston. We lived with Tony for a few months, then we bounced around the east side of town for a couple of years. I have little to no recollection of any of this.

Cogito, Ergo Sum (I Think, Therefore I Exist) -- Rene Descartes

Many of my earliest memories are blurry and discontinuous: rolling around on a thick carpet in a dimly lit room, Mom rubbing my legs to alleviate excruciating muscle spasms, gasping for air in the midst of an asthma attack, sitting on my mother's lap in a crowded room (probably a hospital waiting room or the welfare office). I remember watching an amazing fireworks display from a balcony, but I'm not exactly sure where that was. Pressing my face against a warm car, lying on a soft couch, staring at a picture on a wall

depicting dogs playing pool, my siblings as children - these are the images that flash through my mind when I rewind the hands of time. Trying to recollect and reconstruct some of these early events is like gazing through a windshield on a foggy day. It wasn't until I was between the ages of two and three years that a consistent flow of consciousness began.

From the beginning, I was extremely hyperactive. When I arose in the mornings, I was in constant motion all day, exerting every ounce of energy at play. Before I could walk, I crawled on the floor and climbed over furniture and, once I found my footing, I zoomed from room to room and jumped on beds and couches. Outside, I ran around at breakneck speeds, climbed trees and inanimate objects, and dug forts and tunnels in the dirt. My high-octane activity alarmed my mother. She had to force me to sit down and rest every few hours, otherwise I would work myself into a frenzy and induce an asthma attack.

I also exhibited an insatiable inquisitiveness and a penchant for adventure early on. Inside our home, I left no object unexamined, no crevice unexplored. Outside, I battled fire-breathing dragons, hunted for buried treasure, and rescued damsels in distress. Every new toy that I received I played with for a couple of days before taking it apart to see how it worked, yet I had a knack for rebuilding them. The world fascinated me and I questioned everything, much to the annoyance of everyone.

One time my mother stepped out onto our front porch and told me to come inside. I wasn't ready to go in so I asked, "Why can't I stay outside?"

"Because little boys need their rest."

"Why do I need to rest?"

"If you don't, you'll have an asthma attack."

"What's asthma?"

"It's what makes it hard for you to breathe sometimes."

"Why do I have asthma?"

"You were born with it, now get inside."

"Why was I born with it?"

Obviously tired of my questions, she stomped her foot on the porch and said, "Just get inside, you little shit!" She generally loved my questions, but I went overboard occasionally.

One of the first places that I recall living was a trailer park off Suburban on the north side of Houston. We lived there twice - the first time I was about two years old, then again when I was four. The park was encompassed by tall pines and thick oaks, with lush plant life growing throughout. The shabby trailers and rickety shacks that comprised the park were connected by hedges and trees and covered in fuzzy, green mold, evoking the feeling that you had left civilization for wilderness as you entered. There were an abundance of insects, reptiles, and small animals inhabiting the park and I made pets out of many of them, much to the annoyance of my mother.

One warm day, I was out playing with a boy my age when we came upon the rusty tractor that the maintenance man used to mow grass and haul things around the park. Always the audacious one, I climbed up into the operator's seat with my friend following right behind. I twisted the steering wheel, pretending to be Speed Racer, while he pushed pedals and pulled levers. Apparently growing bored with that, he crawled onto the gas tank and unscrewed the cap. The pungent fumes caressed my nostrils as I watched him bend over the gas hole and sniff. A few seconds later, he looked back at me. "Wh-whoa! Da-do ya huh-hear that?"

I was confused. "Uh-uh."

"Huh-humming," he stuttered. He returned to the gas hole, opened his mouth, then deliberately breathed in and out several times before motioning me over. "It muh-makes ya huh-hum. Try it."

He was acting strange and I knew something wasn't right, but I didn't want to seem uncool, so I switched positions with him. Hovering over the hole, I lowered my head and imitated my friend, slowly inhaling and exhaling. A tingling sensation began to pulsate through my body, my breathing increased, and I felt dizzy. I leaned against the tractor's frame and heard a "WHAA-WHAA-WHAA" noise, kind of like the sound from the old TV show, "The Six Million Dollar Man." Every sound seemed amplified: children laughing in the distance, birds chirping, motorists passing on a nearby street. No older than five years old, I was high for the first time in my life.

How much time elapsed before I heard my mother yelling, I can't say. "Bobby Lynn, don't make me come after you, boy!" She must've been really mad because that was the only time she called me Bobby Lynn, which she knew I hated. I looked around and my friend was gone. My intentions were to get off the tractor, but I must've lost my train of thought and started spacing out because the next thing I remember was being pulled off of the tractor and Mom spanking me. "Didn't you hear me calling you?! Stay away from this piece of junk, if I catch you around it again your ass will be grass and I will be the lawn mower!"

Unfortunately, the lesson wasn't learned. I snuck back on the tractor several times before we moved. My inability to distinctively recall and chronologically order many early events in life, as well as my other mental deficiencies, can be traced to this episode and years of drug abuse.

Born Into Adversity

The emergence of consciousness was soon proceeded by an understanding that life is a struggle and I would have to be strong to survive. Through sweat and tears my mother strove to make ends meet during the early years of my life, doing everything in her power to stave off our hunger pangs, keep clothes on our backs, and pay the bills. Being an uneducated, single parent with limited job skills, this wasn't an easy task. She proved time and again, though, to be resourceful, always finding a way to provide for my siblings and me. Despite the fact that we lived hand-to-mouth, her presence comforted us and gave us a sense of security. With her, we believed we would make it.

With that said, there were many occasions when we could only afford to eat one meal a day. Once, I opened our refrigerator and found a jar of jelly and a carton of milk (Mom tried to keep milk because it helped my muscle spasms). Of course, I knew that we didn't have anything else in there because I'd already opened the refrigerator door countless times that day, but I believed in magic so I did it anyway. Sick of eating jelly on a spoon, I went to our neighbor's and asked if they had some bread to eat with the jelly. They didn't have bread, but they gave me tortillas. I had jelly tacos for lunch that afternoon!

The scenery changed more often than the weather back then. From trailer parks to apartments, Mom moved us to places conducive to our survival. That meant moving closer to one of her jobs to shorten the commute, or moving in with, or close to, friends or family. It wasn't easy raising three children alone. Mom frequently depended on the assistance of others.

One such person was an affable old man named Robert Sutton; we all called him Grandpa, or Pops. My father was in the Harris County Jail in 1970 when he met Grandpa and his son, Tommy Lynn, both of whom I'm named after. They spent a few months in the jail together, then later did time on the Eastham Unit in Huntsville where they developed lasting friendships. My father and Tommy Lynn were released in 1977 while Grandpa remained inside. After my father was sent to prison in Missouri in 1979, he contacted Grandpa and asked him to find us and help us out. Grandpa promised him that he would do what he could and, from my perspective, he did an admirable job fulfilling that promise.

Grandpa spent many years living the life of a street bum, sleeping under bridges, and drinking booze. Living this lifestyle, he learned a variety of methods that enabled him to get by and feed his addiction to alcohol. When he entered our lives in the early 1980s, he employed some of these "tricks" to help out our mother.

"Dumpster hopping" was Grandpa's favorite money making endeavor and he took my sister and me along on many of these escapades. We would hop into his van and ride into middle to upper class neighborhoods and behind department stores to shakedown dumpsters. He would lift me up over the edge of a dumpster and I'd go in rummaging for

items he deemed valuable. After I made a find, I would hand my discovery to him and he'd hand it to my sister, who loaded it into the van. We were mainly searching for broken or defective electrical appliances - TVs, VCRs, stereos, etc. - that could be repaired and sold or stripped for parts, but we found numerous items, such as clothes, shoes, and furniture, that were either new or in great condition. Grandpa was fond of saying, "One man's junk is another's treasure."

We also hit fast food places, particularly chicken joints. After these restaurants close up for the night, they throw away the already cooked food that wasn't sold because health codes prevent them from refrigerating it and selling it later. When an employee would open the backdoor to dispose of the leftover food, we'd be lurking in the shadows, waiting to retrieve the bags from the dumpster after they reentered the building. That's how we ate some nights until these places caught on and began throwing the food away without bagging it up. We were hungry, but we weren't THAT hungry.

When all else failed, Grandpa resorted to theft. He used to walk into the Sac-N-Save supermarket off Highway 59 and load a basket with groceries, then nonchalantly push it past the cashiers, right out the front door. He did this repeatedly until they busted him and called the police. Thankfully, the two cops that arrived on the scene knew him and my mother from previous encounters, so they just reprimanded him and brought him home to Mom with a warning: "Keep him away from the supermarket or he's going to jail."

If Grandpa went to jail he would likely go back to prison for the rest of his life since he was a habitual criminal. My mother made sure he didn't shoplift after that.

Another source of income sometimes available was one of my mother's boyfriends. Unfortunately, the few men that I remember her being with were scumbags. One man she was with was named James, sometimes called Bo. He was an angry soul who openly detested my brother and me. No matter how hard we tried, we could do no right in James' eyes. He kicked Steven in the groin once, showing that he had no compunction about using his extremities to "discipline" us. When I was about five years old, I left some toys on the living room floor and he spiked me like a football, then commenced to punch. Exhibiting obstinacy early on, I screamed through tears,

"Wait until my dad gets home, he'll kick your ass!" He hit me again and pointed at me. "Your daddy's a punk and he's getting ass fucked right now. Don't you know what happens in prison?" "I hate you, you lying bitch!"

My brother and I slept in the same room and we stayed up many nights talking about James and how much we wished our real dad would come home. "Bubba, when dad gets home will he kick that punk's butt?" "Yeah, our dad is one tough dude," he assured me. "I can't wait until he comes home." After a moment of silence I asked, "Who can beat up our dad?" "The Incredible Hulk." "Who can beat up the Incredible Hulk?" "He-Man, the most powerful man in the universe!" "Who can beat up He-Man?" Deepening his voice he

roared, "Almighty God!" I was impressed, but I pressed on, "Who can beat up God?" He placed me in a headlock and exclaimed, "Only I!" We wrestled around until we heard our mother warn us to keep it down. We had our own way of dealing with problems.

My mother sometimes talked about our father. She spoke of him with reverence, affectionately describing him and telling my siblings and me stories about him. Most of this was for my benefit because they knew him, but they enjoyed our moments together and listened attentively. I grew to love the man my mother talked about and I longed for him to return home. "When will dad be home, Momma?" "Pretty soon" "When's 'pretty soon?'" "It's not too far away."

My five year old mind conceptualized "pretty soon" as being a time of the year, like after Christmas or before Easter. I wasn't sure when it was, but I knew that all would be righted in the world "pretty soon."

Brothers Be Brothers

When I hear words such as unselfish, sacrifice, or altruism, I think of my brother Steven. From preadolescence until he was imprisoned at age 25, Steven worked and contributed almost every penny of his hard earned money towards our welfare. In the early stages of my life, he eased my mother's burden by collecting cans, mowing grass, and doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. Later in life, he worked a variety of manual labor jobs – auto mechanic, roofer, painter, bricklayer, and tree climber. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone with a better work ethic; he was a diamond in the rough for many companies. Without his help, our family wouldn't have survived.

As illustrated by the above mentioned wrestling match and dialogue, Steven and I have shared an unbreakable bond since we were children. With my father in prison, Steven was my male role model and he taught me many life lessons.

If you follow the winding, concrete road that splits the trailer park off Suburban, you'll run into an luxuriant expanse of piney woods. My brother and I explored these woods, following already existing trails and chopping our own. We also spent quite a few nights camping out there, roasting marshmallows on a campfire, and listening to Grandpa tell ghost stories.

About a half mile into the woods lies a body of water covering about three acres; we called this the sandpit. If you were coming from the trailer park, to the left of the sandpit there's a deep gully enveloped by forest separating the sandpit from a freshwater lake, roughly half the size of the sandpit. The woods, sandpit, and lake offered us a respite from the pain of our daily life.

When I was four years old, Steven told me to put some shorts on because he was about to teach me how to swim. Previously, I played in the shallow water or rode my brother's back as he swam, so the prospect of learning to swim on my own had me stoked. I quickly put some shorts on and we made our way down to the sandpit.

There was a 20x4 ft. wooden raft afloat and we climbed aboard. Sitting on the edge with my feet kicking in the water, I gleefully watched the shore as my brother paddled us out towards the center of the sandpit. "When you gonna teach me, Bubba?" "Let's get the raft out a little further." "How you gonna teach me?" Silence. I turned just in time to see him rushing at me, but too late to do anything except tense up and let out a shriek as I plunged into the water. "Kick your feet, Robert! Kick your feet!" Overwhelmed by panic, it took a couple of seconds for his words to sink in. I ferociously kicked my feet and slung my arms until I resurfaced. "Help! I'm drowning!" "No you ain't, just keep kicking!" "Help me, Bubba! I'm drowning!" "Look at yourself, you're swimming! Just keep kicking, you can do it!" I kept kicking and moving my arms and soon realized that, indeed, I was swimming. This calmed me some and I stopped yelling. My brother was staring down at me smiling. "See, I told you you were swimming. Continue kicking your feet and paddle your arms towards the raft."

I followed his instructions and he helped me onto the raft. Splayed out on the raft and breathing hard, I was utterly exhausted. About five minutes later, Steven picked me up and tossed me back into the water. "Practice makes perfect, little brother!" He later showed me a variety of strokes and techniques. I was a fish in the water, it all came naturally to me.

Another time, we took Steven's brand new bicycle, which was given to him by a camp counselor who later tried to molest him, out on the raft. He had a bright idea. He was going to sit on one end of the raft and submerge the bottom half of the bike into the water while he held on to the handlebars and pedaled. It was supposed to propel us through the water like a motorboat. After a few rotations, he lost his grip and the bike sank to the bottom, lost forever. That was a \$500.00 bicycle. He freaked out over his loss; my mother, Grandpa, and I poked fun at him about it.

The freshwater lake opposite the sandpit was replete with perch and we caught dinner in it a time or two. We had to be careful because the lake was on private property and the owners were out there regularly. They caught us fishing once and ran us off with threats of calling the police if they found us on their property again. That wasn't enough to keep us away; we discovered a blind spot where we could fish undetected as long as nobody was out on the water.

Early one morning, Steven and I walked down to the lake to test his new rod-n-reel, also a gift from the perverted camp counselor. Steven practiced casting his line while I dug in the dirt for earthworms to use for bait. I worked my way behind him and looked up just as he slung his rod-n-reel backwards to cast. The line and hook brushed over my

body and abruptly shot up, catching my upper lip. Temporarily immobilized by shock, I could only watch as he pulled on his rod-n-reel a couple of times. He must've thought that the line was caught in a tree limb. Finally, I was able to let out a shout, "Ahhh! Muh luhp!"

He dropped the rod-n-reel and came to my aid. The hook was stuck in my lip and I was bleeding profusely. There was no way he could remove it without ripping my lip apart. We had to walk back to the trailer park and find the maintenance man, who cut the hook out with a pair of wire cutters.

For a moment there, I knew how the fish felt.

Our neighbors gave us an old bicycle in disrepair when I was almost five. My brother fixed it up and called me over, "Today you ride like the wind." He balanced the bike by holding one of the handlebars and told me to climb on. "I'm gonna push you slowly and let you get the feel of it, then I'm gonna push you fast and let you go, got that?" "Yeah".

We moved slowly down the road and every few seconds he would remove his hands and allow me to ride on my own. Then he accelerated and let me go. I coasted for about 20 feet before slamming into a trailer, having the wind knocked out of me and incurring minor cuts and bruises. Reluctantly, I got up and we tried it again with a similar result. This went on most of the day before I was able to navigate the bicycle from one end of the trailer park to the other. Sleeping was painful that night, but I could ride a bike so I was happy.

Our relationship wasn't always so amicable. Horseplay often led to serious blows and me on the losing end of an ass kicking. Steven said he was toughening me up, preparing me for the real world. If that was the case, you'd think that he would've let me win once in awhile to build my confidence, right? Wrong! I've come close to defeating him, but he invariably prevailed when we fought.

Make no mistake about it, I asked for many of those ass whoopings. One fourth of July, Grandpa gave me two packs of Black Cat firecrackers and a lighter with orders to stay outside with them. After growing bored of blowing up cans and ant mounds, I returned to our trailer with mischief on my mind. Steven built model cars and trucks and displayed them all over the trailer. I lined a couple up on his bedroom window, strategically placed firecrackers in each, and connected a fuse to them. Satisfied with my work, I went back outside with a chair and set it outside of his window, stood on top of it, and yelled into the trailer, "Bubba, I accidentally broke a model, come see if you can fix it."

I knew that would get him off the couch.

As soon as I heard footsteps, I lit the fuse and took off running. I laughed when I heard the firecrackers exploding and my brother scream in horror! Of course, he chased me down and beat the hell out of me, but I had a smile on my face the whole time. We had our battles, but we stood together through the hard times and never stopped loving each other.

Insufficient Supervision

With our mother usually working multiple jobs and Grandpa lost in a bottle of wine, my siblings and I had to police ourselves. Consequently, we did things that we shouldn't have been doing, created unnecessary problems for our mother, and occasionally found ourselves in dangerous situations.

One afternoon, when we were still living in the trailer park off Suburban, I was outside playing with some kids and one of them invited me inside his home. He told me his parents were at work and we could watch TV and eat cereal, so I followed him into his place. We made a huge mess in the kitchen before watching TV, then I had to use the bathroom. He showed me to it and said he would meet me outside. After I finished my business, I left the bathroom and walked down the hallway leading to the front entrance. Before I reached the end of the hallway, I noticed a bedroom door ajar. I peeked inside the room and spotted a wooden dresser adorned with shiny whatnots. With my curiosity piqued, I entered the room and went to the dresser. A chrome pistol was laying on the edge and I immediately picked it up for examination. I knew at once that it wasn't like any of my toys, it was too heavy. Extending my arm, I pointed the gun in the air and gently squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. Fumbling with it some more, I switched the safety over and again aimed into the ceiling before squeezing the trigger. Still nothing. It must be broken, I thought.

I left the bedroom and walked out of the house with the gun in my hand, anxious to show it to my friends. A girl I played with was at the end of the driveway and I called her, "Hey, look what I got!"

She saw me waving the gun in the air and a concerned look formed on her face. I assured her that it was broken and demonstrated by pointing it at her and squeezing the trigger. Nothing happened. She relaxed a little, but kept her distance and stared at me. Switching the safety back over, I raised the gun in her direction and squeezed the trigger. It exploded in my hand and fell to the ground. The girl let out an ear piercing scream and we both ran in opposite directions. I missed her.

In full stride, I ran up the stairs to my trailer and jerked the door open. My heart was racing a million miles a second as I locked the door and ran into my bedroom, jumped in my bed, and pulled the covers over myself. No one was in the house except me. Still, I laid in bed, fully clothed, for what seemed like an hour before I heard the front door open.

"Buckshot, where are you?" It was Grandpa. I was three when he started calling me that because I pulled out an old piece of a shotgun when the cops had come to our place to talk to him. "Get in here, I want to have a word with you."

Slowly, I got out of bed and met Grandpa in the hallway. "Yes, sir?" "You been playing with guns?" "No, sir." He looked disappointed. "Don't lie to me, Son. Did you go inside someone's house and take their gun?" Placing my hands behind my back, I stared at the

floor. "Yes sir." "You scared a little girl and she went crying to her momma. The landlord just cussed me out and threatened to kick us out if you went outside alone again. Got no choice. Buckshot, I gotta tell your momma."

Mom came home from work that night and spanked me. She wouldn't allow me outside alone for a long time after that incident.

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Anna and Pasquala, six and eight years old respectively, were my neighbors when I was five. The three of us were alone in their trailer one day watching cartoons. Anna kept messing my hair up with her hands, distracting me from the show, until I finally had enough. I wrestled her to the floor and, pinning her down with my knees on her arms, I messed her hair up. Pasquala blind-sided me, grabbed me by the waist, and wrestled me off of Anna, then they both tag teamed me. I tried to break free, but with Pasquala sitting on the upper half of my body and Anna on my legs, I wasn't going anywhere. Pasquala giggled and pinched my cheek. "You're so cute, baby! Isn't he cute, Anna?"

Anna laughed and teased, "Oh yeah, the baby's so cute!" My body began to feel warm with the girls on top of me and I stopped resisting. It got quiet. Pasquala eased her face over me and planted kisses all over my face. She then ran her hand down my body and rubbed my pelvic area with Anna watching in silence. Pasquala got off of me, grabbed my hand, and said, "Let's go to the back." We all walked into the back bedroom and Pasquala told us to take our clothes off. We all removed our clothes. Sitting on their bed naked, we began touching each other's private parts. This went on for awhile until we heard a car door slam shut, signifying the return of their mother. I hurriedly put my clothes on and bolted out the backdoor and ran into my trailer. No one ever suspected a thing.

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When I was four years old we lived in a red brick, two story apartment complex in a predominantly black ghetto. One afternoon my sister Tammie and I were home alone while our mother and her boyfriend James were at work. Steven was out with his friends and there was no telling where Grandpa was. I helped Tammie clean the apartment and she made our favorite dish, macaroni and cheese. After we ate, I asked her if we could go to the swimming pool. The public pool, about 10 blocks from our apartment, was one that

we frequented whenever possible. Tammie said we could go for an hour, but no longer than that because we had to be home when Mom returned from work.

We changed into our swimming gear and left the apartment. At the swimming pool, I splashed around in the shallow end (at this point I hadn't learned to swim) and Tammie watched me from close by. She told me it was time to leave an hour later, but I gave her a little trouble, making her pull me out.

On the walk home we crossed a street and treaded a concrete sidewalk with buildings lined to our left. As we approached an alley, a black guy jumped out and grabbed Tammie, pulling her into it kicking and screaming. I screamed for help as her assailant put his hand over her mouth to stymie her screams and they receded further into the darkness. There wasn't a soul in sight as all of this transpired. Taking a deep breath, I darted into the alley and found the guy pinning Tammie against a wall, ripping her bathing suit off. I lunged at him and wrapped my arms around his leg. He knocked me back and kicked me. Tammie was crying and she begged me to run and tell Mom.

I pushed myself off the ground and ran home as fast as I could, crying the whole way, hoping beyond hope that my sister would be okay. Once I arrived at the apartment, I banged on our door until it was opened. "Mom! Someone's hurting Sissy!" My mother lifted me into her arms and consoled me, "Calm down, baby. Who's hurting Sissy?" Wheezing heavily, I tried to explain, "A black! We was swimming and a black got her! He tore her clothes and he hit me, you gotta help her now!" Grandpa, Steven and James were in the living room. James laughed and said, "It's probably just her boyfriend." Mom stared holes through him, then put me down. "Show me where, baby." I led the way for my mother, brother and Grandpa. I found the alley, but there weren't any signs of my sister or her assailant and I started crying, "It was here, I remember!" Mom told me to calm down and think. Maybe it was somewhere else? "No, it was here!" We walked around searching for Tammie for a very long time. Finally, she appeared in the distance - naked, crying, and holding her ripped bathing suit over the front of her body.

A couple of days after my sister was raped, the Children's Protective Services (CPS) took her away from my mother, placing her in a foster home. This was the first of several times that the CPS took custody of her, supposedly for her own safety. Problem was, no matter where she went, or who's care she was in, people abused her. Her first foster father molested her and his other children repeatedly before being sent to jail. Later in life, her family and friends constantly took advantage of her, cheated her out of money, and physically abused her. My cousin's ex-girlfriend, a dope fiend named Julie, introduced her to crack cocaine which she became addicted to and sold herself for. What makes these people additionally reprehensible is the fact that Tammie is mentally challenged. Her IQ is in the lower 60s and she isn't mentally capable of surviving on her own. My sister has always had a heart of gold, though. She'd help anyone in need if she could. Unfortunately, people have exploited this attribute at every turn.

When the Going Gets Tough

Steven and Tammie walked to and from school when we lived off Suburban because their school was just a mile down the road. On the way home one afternoon, a drunk driver swerved off the road and hit my brother, knocking him into a ditch. The man who hit him stopped, then tried to drive away, but Don, the man who ran the car wash on the intersection of Suburban and East Mt. Houston, witnessed the entire accident and ran out in the middle of the road, preventing a hit and run. Don hollered at his wife, Flo, and told her to call an ambulance.

My brother suffered multiple broken bones, internal bleeding, brain damage, and was in a coma for several days. Initially, the doctors weren't sure if he would survive and that had us worried until he came out of the coma and his condition was upgraded from critical to stable. He had to stay in the hospital for over a month and my mother was by his side the entire time. She was working at a convenience store at the time and the manager fired her for missing work, complicating our lives even more.

While my mother was with Steven in the hospital, Tammie and I stayed with Grandpa. We went dumpster hopping and collected cans for food money, plus we received help from churches. They donated canned goods and gave Grandpa a little money for gas, all of which helped immensely. It wasn't nearly enough, though. The landlord was threatening eviction if he didn't get some rent.

Steven had a distant look about him the day he came home from the hospital. Mom said he had amnesia and was slowly coming out of it, but it would take him awhile to remember everything. She also warned me to be careful around him because he just had a body cast removed and was still sore.

Physically speaking, my brother recovered completely a couple of months later. There was a conspicuous difference in his personality, though, which I later learned is common in people who suffer brain damage. He seemed slightly offbeat and it took longer for some things to sink in. He was also more reserved than before and at school he started failing classes. My father said Steven was sharp-minded and quick-witted as a boy prior to our father's incarceration. Undoubtedly, brain damage from the car accident slowed his cognitive processing abilities, yet he retained his mechanical aptitude and impressively honed those skills over the next few years.

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Shortly after Steven was released from the hospital, our mother talked with the manager at her old job and was rehired. Our mother's hope that some sense of normalcy would return to our lives was short-lived. On her second night back at work, an armed

robber entered the store demanding all of the money as she was lifting the cash register to clean under it. The sight of the gun caused her to drop the machine and it bounced off of the counter and onto her foot, shattering most of the bones in it.

With Mom being unable to walk, much less work, our quality of life rapidly diminished. Grandpa did what he could do and we received some help from churches and friends, but it just wasn't enough. Food was scarce and the landlord gave my mother an ultimatum - give him money or get out!

There was a man named Franky that my mother was with when I was a baby who went to prison. She wrote him a letter explaining her dilemma, he wrote back with a solution: pack up and move in with his sister in Cleveland, Texas. He said he had informed her that we were in a bind and she would be expecting us. Grandpa had sold his van, so we had to find a ride to Cleveland.

Franky's sister wasn't home when we arrived. The people that drove us over asked if we wanted a ride elsewhere, but Mom said that they were probably out eating or shopping, that we'd wait for them to return. Day gave way to night and there still wasn't any sign of Sissy, Franky's sister. It began to get chilly, so we huddled together for warmth on the front porch. Realizing that Sissy wouldn't be home that night, Mom instructed Steven to break a window and let us inside.

The next morning, Mom opened the mailbox and found a stack of mail, including Franky's letter to Sissy, that indicated Sissy was out of town, probably on vacation. She knew nothing about us moving in with her. We had nowhere else to go and all we could do was wait for Sissy to return. In the interim, we ate their food (they had a deep-freeze full of meat, we knew we would be okay for several months if need be), slept in their beds, and I played with Sissy's son's toys. Two weeks passed before Sissy and her son Clint pulled into the driveway. We all filed out onto the porch to meet them. Sissy stepped out of her vehicle, glared at us and her open front door, then demanded, "Who the fuck are you people and why the hell are ya'll in my goddamn house?!"

My mother held Franky's letters out. "Franky wrote me and told me to come to you because I had no place to live. When we got here we figured you would be home soon, so we told our ride to leave; we had nowhere else to go and no way to get there if we did."

As Sissy read the letter her expression of anger morphed into a grin. "You mean to tell me you people been living in my house, eating my groceries up this whole time? How the hell did you get in?" Steven showed her the window that he taped a plastic bag over. Still smiling she said, "You people ain't bashful are you?!"

Sissy was one of the most benevolent spirits I've ever met. She ribbed us for breaking into her home, but she made it clear that she was teasing. She welcomed us to stay as long as we needed to and we all thanked her for her understanding and hospitality.

Starting school

We lived on the south side of Houston in a run down, two story apartment building when I began school. It was in the fall of 1984 when Mom enrolled me in kindergarten at McGregor Elementary School. She and Steven walked me to class on my first day and introduced me to my teacher. Ms. Gray, a heavy set black lady with silver streaks in her hair, greeted me with a warm hug, assuaging my nervousness. "Don't worry, Robert. We gone have us some real good fun, you just wait and see." A jovial spirit with an infectious smile, Ms. Gray made going to school enjoyable.

The classroom was divided in half by a piece of tape; Ms. Gray's class was on one side, a first grade class on the other. It worked out well, though. Both classes competed by seeing which could decorate their side of the room best with colored pictures and origami. My days were spent painting, coloring, playing games like "duck, duck, goose," and we all took a nap. In retrospect, it was like a daycare.

While I didn't learn much in Ms. Gray's class, I did pick up on a nasty habit after school. Steven walked me to school each morning and I walked the five blocks home with the kids from our block. On the way home, several of us would stop off at a convenience store to watch the big kids play video games. One time this kid about my age opened the freezer that stored the ice cream and hid an ice cream sandwich in his coat, then walked out the door. The store clerk was none the wiser. Desiring an ice cream myself, I waited until the clerk turned his back to me and I quickly opened the freezer and stuffed an ice cream down my pants. As I walked the rest of the way home eating the ice cream, I thought that was too easy. That was the first of innumerable times that I committed theft.

After we left the south side a month later, we moved into a white house on the north side. Grandpa knew the man who owned it and he allowed us to stay there free of rent, we just had to pay the utilities. The house had three bedrooms, a large backyard with a big pecan tree, and there was an enormous pile of dirt that Gene, the jolly old owner, had dumped from his dump truck. Both the tree and the dirt pile kept me preoccupied all day.

Everything was going smoothly for several months. I started going to school again, although they weren't teaching us very much, and my mother had a good job. Somehow she lost that job, though, and things got ugly in a hurry. The gas, water, and electric companies all discontinued their services within the span of a week. Steven illegally turned everything back on, but the companies soon caught on and put pad locks on the breakers and valves. With no way to pay our utilities, we had to move again.

My mom contacted Franky again - he was still in prison - and he told her that he would be released soon and paroling to his parents' house in Baytown, Texas. He gave my mother his mother's phone number and told her to call and ask if we could stay with her until he was released. Mom called and, after the phone call, told us to pack up, that we were going to Baytown.

Grandpa did not go with us. I'm not exactly sure where he went. We didn't meet up with him again for over five years.

Jack and Viola, Franky's parents, lived on waterfront property in a blue, wood-framed house on the outskirts of Baytown. An affluent couple in their 80s, they cordially welcomed us into their home. Viola had a room prepared for my mother when we arrived while Steven and I were shown to their grandson Buster's room where we would sleep.

Buster was 13 years old and spoiled rotten. He never wanted for anything in his life and his room, furnished with a large screen TV set, VCR, video games, stereo system, and a pool table, evinced just that. Living with Buster was paradise to my brother and me. We exhausted ourselves playing games and watching movies, while eating Buster's favorite foods - pizza and hamburgers. Life was good.

Baytown Elementary School was an excellent facility, noticeably better than my previous schools, and the teachers emphasized academics rather than playing games; although, there were games played, too. My first day of class we practiced our ABCs and counted money. In between the ages of three and four years, my mother taught me how to count using her spare change jar and whatever cash she had on her. When the teacher at Baytown Elementary broke out the paper coins, I impressed her with my precocity. "Wow, Robert! Who taught you to count like that?"

I was at once embarrassed and proud. "My mom." "Come with me, I want you to show Ms. Jones." She led me into the hallway and stuck her head into another classroom. Another woman stepped out into the hallway and my teacher asked me, "Will you count out loud for Ms. Jones, Robert?" "Yes, Ma'am." I counted to fifty and she asked me to count in fives. I counted in fives beyond a hundred, tens beyond five hundred, and twenty-fives beyond one thousand. They both smiled at me the entire time. My teacher beamed, "How would you like to be in Ms. Jones' class with the fast kids, Robert?" "I'd like that." "Good. You do me proud in Ms. Jones' class okay?"

The next day I was transferred to Ms. Jones' class where we practiced writing, addition and subtraction. The positive reinforcement by these teachers inspired me greatly. Overnight mathematics became my favorite subject and I excelled in it throughout school.

*** **

Franky was released from prison a month later. A short, bald-headed man who mirrored the character on the "Benny Hill Show," the little dude that Benny Hill patted on the head. Franky was soft-spoken and seemed to be a good guy at first. He played pool with us boys and he let me ride Buster's go-cart, something my mother wouldn't let me do before Franky arrived.

My perceptions of him changed drastically one night. As I prepared for bed, I heard my mother and Franky arguing in the next room. Concerned, I peeked through the door and saw him pointing his finger at Mom, yelling something unintelligible. She pushed his hand away from her face and he drove his hand into her chest. He then leaned over her and put his finger on her face. "Stupid bitch, don't you ever raise your hand to me."

Witnessing this infuriated me. I was tired of people hurting my family; it filled me with rage and hate. I ran at him and latched on to his leg, then sank my teeth into his flesh, drawing blood. He let out a cry of anguish before smacking me on the head and shaking me off.

Just as he reached back to hit me again, Viola entered the room. "Franky! Don't you hit that child." She was incensed. "How dare you behave this way in my house! Get out before I call the police and have you arrested!"

He didn't say a word as he put his clothes on and walked out. That was the last time we saw Franky.

Viola later told my mother that we could stay with them as long as we liked. We lived with them for another month while my mother saved money from her job at the flea market, then we moved into some apartments in the Baytown city limits. We thanked Jack and Viola for all of their help and they made my mother promise to let them know if she needed anything, which she did. My mother was a proud woman who preferred providing for us herself.

A Father to Call My Own

The apartments in Baytown were certainly the best that we had lived in to that point. White bricked with dark, wood trim, they had central air-conditioning and heating, a laundry mat, and two swimming pools. The parking lots and streets connecting each of the four buildings constituting the complex were made of smooth concrete, perfect for bicycle and skateboard riding. A gully filled with crawfish wrapped around the backside of the apartments and I spent a lot of time in it.

The day we moved into our apartment, Steven and I put on our swimming trunks and went down to the swimming pool. We did flips and cannonballs off the diving board, then we dove after coins to see who could locate them at the bottom first. I lived in that swimming pool over the next couple of months. Mom had to literally go in after me to get me out a couple of times.

In June of 1986, our mother called Steven and me inside to chat. "What do you boys think about me and your real father getting back together?"

I almost couldn't believe my ears. My heartbeat accelerated as Steven replied, "We want our dad, don't we, Robert!" "Yes." Our mother went on to tell us that she had spoken

with him over the phone and that he would be released at the end of the week. She had told our father that she would talk with us and let him know her decision at the airport. The news had me astounded, totally speechless.

At the airport I stood inbetween Mom and Steven as passengers exited the plane. I hadn't seen a picture of my father, so as I studied each face, I was relying on Mom's description: an older man with a bald head. An elderly man fitting that description appeared walking with a cane. "Is that him?!" They both laughed and Mom said, "I sure hope not." The guy was in his 70s.

A moment later a man emerged with a thick ZZ Top beard, bald head, and a cup in his hand. He stopped in his tracks when his eyes rested on us and he stared for a second, savoring something. Tears began to stream down his wrinkled face. He tossed his cup into a trash can and closed the distance separating us in long strides. He and my mother embraced, then she waved Steven and me closer so the four of us could huddle. In the midst of one of the most loving and memorable moments of my life, I cried and thought, I have a father.

To be continued.....

A Dysfunctional Family

“Uncle Sam!” boomed a disembodied voice, interrupting our family moment. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a group of family members rapidly approaching. Wayne McLain Junior was leading the pack. Earlier that morning, while we prepared for the trip to the airport, my mother said that Aunt Lema and her family would accompany us to greet my father off of the plane. We rode to the airport with Aunt Lema and her husband, Ricky, but they had been waiting in the parking lot for the others to arrive. Junior, a giant of a man, eclipsed my father with a bear hug and bellowed, “How the hell are ya, Uncle Sam!”

Everyone took turns embracing my father and welcoming him home. I later learned that while my father was in the Missouri State Penitentiary, nobody in our family wrote him a letter, visited, or supported him in any way. Such negligence must’ve occurred to him and some of the others that afternoon because the initial joyous ambience began to shift to a palpable uneasiness. Undoubtedly sensing the growing tension, my mother joked, “Damn, that was a long game of pool!” Everyone laughed.

While all of this transpired, I studied my father. His smile stretched his crow’s-feet and the wrinkles across his forehead, all indicative of an arduous life. He described the plane ride to Texas in a Southern twang, using his hands to animate the conversation. Watching him evoked a flood of emotions, the most prevalent being the exhilaration of meeting my biological father. I’d seen the other kids interacting with their dads, heard their stories about how strong their fathers were and all the cool things that they could do; it was thrilling to finally have my own father.

He caught me staring and placed a hand on my shoulder. “And who’s this little fella again?” “I’m Robert.” Our eyes met. A million questions raced through my head, but I simply said, “I’m your son.” His eyes got misty again and he bent over to wrap his arms around me. I could smell alcohol on his breath when he pressed his beard against my face, squeezed tightly, then whispered, “Good to meet ya, Robert.” He swallowed to catch his breath. “I love you, son.”

We all walked to the airport restaurant to get drinks and relax. I was seated at the table with my parents, brother, Aunt Lema, and Ricky. After our drinks were served, I asked my dad, “Do you have two dollars?” “Be quiet, Robert,” my suddenly clairvoyant mother interjected. “You don’t need two dollars.” “Whatcha need two dollars for?” my

father asked with a quizzical look. I was speechless. “Tell him what you want two dollars for,” my mother insisted. “Your daddy’s home now, I can let him deal with you.” All eyes were on me. I hesitated before saying, “I wanna buy some dip, it costs two dollars a can.

Steven and his friends from our apartments dipped snuff and—wanting to be like them—I picked the habit up. My mother didn’t like it, but she offered little resistance. Slightly inebriated and probably not ready to disappoint me yet, my father reached into his pants pocket, removed a leather-bound, prison-crafted wallet, and fingered out two dollars. Uncle Ricky stood up, took the two dollars, and told me to follow him and he’d buy it for me.

We left the airport and traveled around Houston visiting family the remainder of the day. Some of the faces were familiar—we lived with them before—most were new to me. Everyone seemed delighted that Uncle Sam was out of prison and most offered him gifts ranging from clothing to money. I wondered where these people were when we were struggling to survive. Where was this generosity when our utilities were shut off, when our refrigerator and cupboards were empty, or when we needed a place to stay? In retrospect, it looked as if some of these people wanted to appear to my father like they had been by our side the entire time he was in prison. Their behavior puzzled me then, but now I understand. They were afraid of Uncle Sam. Cousin Junior and Uncle Ricky didn’t want my dad to know that they showed up on our front porch after midnight once and took away the furniture that Lema gave my mother; we were left with a chair and two mattresses. Now I know why my cousin Nancy, Lema’s second oldest daughter, invited us to stay with her in their family’s brick home and why her husband, James Allan, paid for dinner at Poncho’s Mexican Buffet that first night. Nobody wanted to aggravate Uncle Sam.

Aunt Lema asked us to spend the night with her, so after we left Poncho’s, we went to her apartment. Her son, John, was kneeling on the living room floor, playing with his brindled pit bull, when we walked through the front door. John wrapped his arm around the dog’s neck, pointed him at a full-body mirror against the wall, and breathed into his ear, “Whaaa-tch him, Dynamite. Whaaa-tch him, boy.”

A rumbling growl pervaded the room as Dynamite focused on his reflection. John tightened his grip on the dog’s collar, slapped him on the backside, then released his neck with the order, “Ssssick him, boy!”

The dog barked ferociously, twisting and turning in an attempt to get at the image of himself. John held him at bay, then calmed him by turning him away from the mirror and praising, “Dat’s a good boy! Yes him is!”

At this point, my father was wasted from drinking all day. He grinned from ear-to-ear, dropped to the floor on hands and knees, and crawled to Dynamite. With his face next to the dog’s ear, he roared, “You ain’t no bad motherfucker!”

Then he sank his teeth into Dynamite's neck and shook his head back and forth. The dog yelped and broke loose, then darted into the hallway with his tail between his legs. This spectacle made everyone laugh, and it was my first peek at how impetuous my father can be while intoxicated.

A Fanatical Grandmother

The psychological connection developed between mother and child from the intrauterine period through the early stages of childhood is extremely powerful. Despite the fact that his mother abused and neglected him most of his life, my father often felt compelled to visit her after extensive intervals of separation. A few days after he stepped off the plane from Missouri, we were in his brother Dewey's car headed to their mother's house.

Grandma Johnson, as I was instructed to call her, lived with her husband, Burt, and son Dewey in a prosperous neighborhood off of FM 1960, on the north side of Houston. My eyes widened as we cruised by luxurious homes with manicured lawns and shiny automobiles out front. It was the kind of subdivision with the "Neighborhood Watch" cars that used to chase Grandpa away when we tried dumpster hopping there. Dewey pulled the car into the driveway of a house with dark, blue siding, a two-car garage, and a large cottonwood in the front yard. It was incredible to think that we had family living there.

Dewey led us down a sidewalk with immaculately trimmed shrubs on one side, a flower garden on the other. He unlocked the front door and we followed him through a white foyer and into the living room. A portly woman with blue hair sat opposite an old, baldheaded man on a matching recliner; both stared languidly at a large screen TV set. The woman looked at my father. "Hello, Sam," my grandmother spoke in a monotone. "Good to see you made it out again." "Good to see ya, too, Mother," my father said as he hugged his mother. With one arm around her, he pointed at me and asked, "Have ya met my youngest?" Grandma Johnson's eyes rested on me. I thought I detected a thin smile, but it vanished when she said, "No, I don't believe so." "Come give your grandma a hug, Robert. You, too, Steven," our father said. I treaded thick carpet and leaned into an embrace. Mentholatum assaulted my nostrils, forcing me to hold my breath and close my eyes. I couldn't wait to get away from her; old people smelled gross. After Steven hugged her, Dewey ushered us into the room where we'd be sleeping, while our parents sat on the couch and conversed with my grandparents. It sounded like someone said, "Jesus," as I walked out of the room.

Later that night, after Dewey cooked and served a delicious chicken dinner, my father informed us that we were going to church the next morning, and then we'd go up to Lake

Livingston for a few days. Before he left the bedroom, I asked, “Can we go to the store and buy some dip?” “You’re too young to be doing that, it stops right now,” he sternly stated. “You ain’t the boss of me!” I shouted. He closed the bedroom door, bit down on his tongue and bottom lip, then smacked me across the head. I tumbled onto the bed and he pulled his belt off. With one hand he turned me over, with the other he slapped his belt over my backside several times. It felt like someone had lit my ass on fire as I tried to wriggle free, but his tight grip prevented escape. Afterwards, he placed both hands on my shoulders, looked me in the eye, and said, “Listen to me, mister. I don’t know what kinda shit you pulled on your momma, but you’re gonna do as I say, you hear me?” “Yes, sir.” He placed my head between his bicep and chest, gave an affectionate squeeze, then kissed the top of my head. “I love you, dude. Don’t ever forget that, okay?” “Okay,” I had calmed down some. “I love you, too, Dad.”

That was the first of innumerable spankings that he handed down to me. While his disciplinary methods were usually unconventional—he was adept at using his hands in a way that wouldn’t seriously injure me—he invariably got my attention. I soon learned to listen when he spoke, and that back talk wasn’t an option. He made it clear that he had my best interest in mind after he disciplined me, and assured me that he loved me. Many accusations can be made against my parents, but no one can ever say that they didn’t love their children.

The following morning, we piled into two cars and left for church. I hadn’t attended church services before, so I wasn’t sure what to expect. The church was a typical one: a white building with an enormous cross on top. Inside, there were rows of pews, a wooden pulpit atop a carpeted platform, and a painting of the Christ crucified affixed to the wall behind the altar.

I was seated between my parents, Steven was next to my mother, my grandparents were on my dad’s side. A silver-haired man in a dark business suit stepped onto the platform, walked behind the pulpit, removed the microphone, and greeted his congregation. He began preaching about sin, heaven, hell, tithing, and God. I tried to listen, but I couldn’t keep up with him.

Halfway through the sermon, a box filled with money was handed to my mother. She passed it to my father, who removed his wallet and placed a couple of one dollar bills inside, then he gave it to his mother and she dropped a handful of what looked like twenty dollar bills into it before passing it to the people in the next pew. I wondered where all of that money was going? The preacher later asked everyone to rise, and he started singing while a woman nearby played the piano. Everyone in the pews, save me, sang along from the songbooks.

Everyone mingled after the services. The preacher approached us and embraced my grandmother. She looked at him in earnest and implored, “Brother Nash, please pray for my son and his family.”

Rumor has it that Grandma Johnson followed Brother Nash from Corpus Christi to Houston after she separated from my biological grandfather. It didn't matter that Nash's brother fathered my cousin Charles, aka Chucky, with Lema's oldest daughter, Christine, then abandoned her; Grandma Johnson remained one of Nash's biggest financial supporters until she died. Brother Nash obviously knew my father because he smiled broadly and proffered his hand. "Sam, how are you?" "Just fine, Brother Nash." My father shook his hand. "Can I pray for you and your family, Sam?" "Sure." "Alright, ya'll gather 'round and let's hold hands," Brother Nash said.

We formed a circle and Brother Nash began praising Jesus and rebuking Satan. By this time, I was tired and wanted to lie down somewhere. I tried to break away from the circle and head to the pews, but my parents, who were holding my hands, tightened their grips. "Satan!" hissed my grandmother. I looked up and she was glaring at me, false teeth clenched, an expression of scorn on her face. Rather than look away, I returned a challenging stare.

Brother Nash finished his prayer a moment later and we all walked outside, climbed into the cars, and went to a restaurant for lunch. I'd only known my grandmother for a day and already didn't like her.

A Flagrant Foul: Half the Distance to the Goal

My anticipation mounted with each mile on the road to Lake Livingston. Dad said we'd go fishing, swimming, possibly ride in a boat, and he and Dewey would barbecue. I was eager to showcase my swimming skills for my dad—I just knew he'd be impressed—but my enthusiasm waned when we drove into a rainstorm just outside of Livingston. By the time we pulled into the trailer rental lot, the rain was pouring down.

My grandparents rented two trailers: one for them and Dewey, the other for my family. Steven and I helped my father and Dewey unload the cars, then the four of us rode to the store to buy dinner. Dewey took some sandwiches and chips to my grandparents, who immediately retreated to their trailer upon arrival, then he returned to eat with us. The plans for the following day were discussed—weather permitting—then my dad and Dewey entertained us with tales from past misadventures.

Shortly thereafter, my parents retired to their bedroom. Dewey, Steven, and I watched an animal show on TV for awhile until Steven decided to call it a day. He set up a pullout bed in the middle of the trailer and bedded down for the night.

Dewey sat next to me on the pullout bed I'd be sleeping on and he told me all about the black panthers and tigers on the TV, making me laugh with his corny imitations of them. According to my mother, Dewey let us live with him when I was a toddler, when

he had his own place. I have a vague recollection of him back then, but he still felt like a stranger to me; although, he seemed like a good guy.

I told Dewey that I was sleepy a little later and he turned the TV and lights off, then left the room. I pulled the blanket over my head and went to sleep with dangerous, wild cats on my mind.

A scream, followed by shouting and my father yelling, “Goddamn queer,” woke me up. I pulled the blanket off of my head just as Dewey was running past me and out of the front door. A few seconds later, my father gave chase in boxers with a butter knife in his hand. My mother then emerged from the hallway with Steven and asked me if I was okay, to which I assured her that I was. My father reentered the trailer a moment later breathing heavily. “The bitch got away,” he said disappointedly.

When Dewey left me that night, he climbed into bed with Steven, squeezed my brother’s penis, kissed him on the nape of the neck, then said, “Give me some covers, baby.” Steven shoved him away and yelled for my father. Fortunately for Dewey, he eluded my dad.

Years later, my father told me that Dewey lived in Seattle, Washington in the early 1960s with his wife and two sons. His wife came home early from work one day and caught him in bed with a man and kicked him out. Dewey later went to prison for ten years and, when he was released, he was open about his homosexuality. My father caught up with him a couple of days after the incident on the lake and let him off with a warning: “Touch one of my boys again and I’ll cut your dicksucking head off.”

We lived with Dewey a couple of times after that and he never behaved inappropriately around us again. In fact, from that day forward, he laughed with us when we called him, “Aunt Dewey.”

Uncle Bill’s House: Summer of 1986

Up In Smoke

We moved with astonishing frequency over the following nine years. Financial instability was the primary reason for this, although I detect a subtler cause. My father, a self-described Gypsy, had spent most of his life in prison where he was constantly told what to do and his every move restricted. In my analysis, we changed addresses many times because living in one place too long reminded him of prison. He enjoyed exercising his freedom to move.

The night before I met my father was the last that I spent at our apartment in Baytown. A few days after we left Livingston, my father was hired as a heavy equipment

operator at Brown-n-Root Construction Company, on the north side of Houston. Since we didn't have a vehicle at the time, we had to move closer to his job. His brother, Bill, let us live with him until my father could accumulate enough money to afford our own place.

Bill Pruett was the antithesis of his brother, Sam. Bill didn't drink alcohol or get high, I don't think he ever went to jail, and he wasn't the least bit aggressive. My father told me that Bill lived in Kansas City, Missouri in the late 1970s. One time, Bill planned a trip to a theme park with his family and, at the last minute, something came up at work that required his assistance. He didn't want to spoil his family's fun, so he told them to go on without him. The problem at his job wasn't as complicated as his employers thought; he fixed it in no time, then headed to the theme park with hopes of surprising his family. When he arrived, he located his wife's van and noticed that it was shaking. Confused, he walked up to it and looked through the window to find his wife lying on her back with an unfamiliar man between her legs. Rather than pound on the guy, which Sam would've done at the very least had he been in the same situation, Bill quietly walked away and drove home. When his wife and kids returned home that night, Bill simply said, "I think we need to see a marriage counselor."

The first time we lived with Bill, he lived in a white, two-story house off of Rebecca Street, across from Northline Mall. It was a cozy place with five bedrooms, garage, and a sizeable backyard. Bill lived there with his second wife, Tina (his first wife, Kathy, was the one that he caught having an affair), daughters, Melannie, Melissa, and Deidre, and son, Mark. Tina's daughter from another marriage, Monique, also lived there with her infant son, Buddy.

Mark, who was in his mid-20s at the time, was afflicted with Down Syndrome. He required assistance to perform the simplest tasks such as using the toilet, bathing, and applying personal hygiene. He usually sat in a chair in the corner of the living room, shaking a plastic comb with his fingers, rocking back and forth, and repeatedly saying, "Dot." I never heard him speak, or even acknowledge anyone's presence, except once. I was the only other person in the room when he suddenly stopped rocking, stopped shaking the comb, and stared at me for about five seconds. It made me paranoid, but when he resumed his routine, I collected myself.

On more than one occasion, I witnessed one of the girls—Tina, Melissa, and especially Monique—slap and punch Mark in his head. He absorbed their blows and continued playing with his comb as if nothing had happened. This disturbed me greatly. I couldn't comprehend why they would treat a helpless person like that. I secretly hoped that Mark, who looked pretty strong, would snatch one of them up and start smacking them in the head. I'll bet that would've made them think twice about hitting him. My father caught Monique punching Mark one time and yelled at her until she cried. After that, none of them ever hit Mark in front of my dad again. Excluding the times that I watched Mark

get assaulted, living with Bill was a blessing. Tina was a remarkable cook and, with Bill working in the booming computer industry, their kitchen was always stocked with groceries. I don't recall ever being hungry at Uncle Bill's house. They also had a color TV with a VCR and we watched movies with them almost every night.

While out in the backyard playing one afternoon, I entered the garage in search of a saw to cut a tree branch off and make a sword out of it. As I sifted through a scattered pile of tools on a worktable, a bright, red object caught my eye. Behind several buckets of paint, was a plastic, one gallon gasoline container. I looked out the garage window to make sure no one was outside, then returned to the container, unscrewed the nozzle, and began huffing.

I soon heard the familiar "WHAA-WHAA-WHAA" sound and became dizzy. Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through my head and I crashed into the wall in front of me. A fist connected with my back, and a pair of hands grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked me off of the ground. "What the fuck is wrong with you," my father demanded. "That shit will kill you, stupid! Do you want to fry your godddamn brain?" "No, sir!" I cried. He sank his fingers into my shoulders, bit down on his tongue and bottom lip, shook me violently, then scolded, "Keep your ass out of here! If I ever catch you doing that again, I will beat you to death! Now go take a bath!" After my bath, I fell asleep on the waterbed in our bedroom. My mother woke me up later that night. My parents were sitting next to me on the edge of the bed, Steven was in a chair close by. Dad gave me a hug and said, "Little dude, that gas is some dangerous shit, you need to keep away from it. Years ago, I had a partner that lost his mind from sniffing that shit." He stared at me seriously, then looked at my mother and said, "Go make sure everyone's asleep." Mom left the room and returned a moment later. "They're asleep." "Fire it up," my father nodded at Steven. Steven reached into his pant's pocket and pulled out what looked like one of the roll up cigarettes that Grandpa smoked. He put it between his lips, sparked a lighter to it, then inhaled powerfully. He took a couple of drags before my dad said, "Let Robert hit it." My brother passed me the joint, I gripped it with my thumb and index finger, brought it to my lips, and took several tokes. Steven told me to hold the smoke in as long as possible and I did until I coughed. "If you're gonna homestead it, build a fence around it," my dad joked as he took the joint from me and puffed on it.

I felt light-headed, my breathing was slow and smooth, and I was very relaxed. Steven made a funny face at me and I started laughing uncontrollably until my father admonished, "Mellow out, dude." I stopped laughing and he continued, "I'd rather you smoke weed than huff gas. Ain't nobody ever died from smoking dope." My parents let me smoke marijuana with them from that day forward. The only exception was that I wasn't allowed to get high on school nights, although I constantly found ways to circumvent that rule until my father finally lifted it when I was about 10 years old. In

many ways, my father tried to be more of a friend to me than a father in an attempt to compensate for all the years he was absent from my life. He probably thought that I wouldn't hate or resent him for missing the first seven years of my life if he let me get by with some things. Whatever the case might be, I trace the beginning of my end to that summer night at Uncle Bill's house.

Aldine Mail Route Apartments: Summer of 1986-Spring of 1987

Developing Addictions

After he was released from prison in 1986, my father unequivocally intended to eschew his former outlaw lifestyle and make an honest living. While he continued to smoke marijuana (he said it didn't influence him the same way hard drugs or alcohol did), he hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since the day I met him and he maintained a steady job most of the following nine years. I've watched how working six (sometimes seven) days a week—usually from sunup until sundown—at backbreaking jobs enervated him, yet he persevered. He once told me that meeting me, and seeing how much Steven had grown, impelled him to do the right thing and stay out of prison so he could watch us grow. He admits that he made numerous mistakes after leaving the Missouri State Penitentiary (i.e. getting me high), but I know that he gave us his best, and I commend him for working, rather than robbing, for money.

The handsome salary that Brown-n-Root paid my father enabled him to rent us a two bedroom apartment in the two-story complex where Aunt Lema lived, on the north side of Houston. He had established himself as a dependable worker and that helped him get Steven a job with Brown-n-Root as a flag man directing traffic around construction sites. From this point on, my father and brother worked as a team so that my mother could stay at home with me, which she preferred.

Our quality of life improved noticeably once we settled into our apartment. My father purchased a used Gremlin car, secondhand furniture from a flea market, and a rent-to-own entertainment center. In addition, Steven and I had our own bedroom with separate beds, there wasn't any more jostling for the bathroom with the girls at Bill's house, and we could watch whatever we wanted on TV without Tina's permission. We also began a tradition: every Friday (or payday) we either went out to eat or ordered takeout, rented movies to watch over the weekend, and bought a quarter ounce of weed that was supposed to last until the following payday, but never did.

My father put me on a weekly allowance after my seventh birthday. After work on paydays, he asked my mother if I did my chores for the week—taking out the trash, washing dishes, cleaning my room—and if she answered yes, he gave me a crisp five dollar

bill. Even on weeks when I was lazy and didn't do all of my chores, my mother never disappointed me by telling my father no.

Every Saturday morning, I ran the half mile down the sidewalk on Aldine Mail Route to the Circle K convenience store on the intersection of Aldine Westfield, with my five dollar bill balled tightly into my fist. By the time I walked through the door, my money would be damp with perspiration. I'd be breathing heavily as I grabbed a 16 ounce Dr Pepper and Snickers, took them to the counter, and respectfully asked the clerk for all quarters in change. The soda and candy bar cost just under a dollar, so I had 16 quarters left; I fed every single one into the Super Mario Bros video arcade in the corner of the store.

Super Mario Bros was a novelty back then. I was entranced by Mario and his brother, Luigi, the ringing brick blocks they banged against, the flying turtles, walking mushrooms, and the antagonist—a fire-breathing dragon named King Koopa who held the princess hostage. The alluring music that played during a game kept me nearby watching as the other kids played once I'd spent my last quarter and my last man died. I was hopelessly addicted to the Italian brothers and their mission to save the princess.

One day, after I'd spent my last quarter, I walked outside and checked the pay phones in front of the store for quarters. No luck. I found one once, so I always checked. With no one inside playing the game, I decided to loiter for a few minutes in hopes that some kid would show up with some quarters. Sometimes a kid would let me play one of the three allotted men after I ran out of quarters, and there was always the chance that some kid's parent would force him/her to leave while their game was still going and I could take over.

Just as I was about to walk home, a lady exiting the store dropped her purse, spilling its contents all over the parking lot. Acting quickly, I ran down a couple of pieces of paper that the wind was carrying away. The woman wore an expression of relief when I handed her her property. She thanked me, opened her billfold, and gave me a dollar for my help. I was smiling when the clerk handed me four quarters a moment later.

A flying turtle killed my last Mario about an hour later, but the encounter with the woman had me thinking. I went back outside, sat on the pavement in front of the pay phones, and surveyed the parking lot. A few minutes later, an old man pulled up in a truck. I met him as he stepped out of it. "Excuse me, sir. Would you happen to have a dollar?" He smirked at me, then he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled a dollar out. As he handed it to me, he advised, "Don't be too friendly with strangers, son" It went into one ear and out of the other. I panhandled daily after that until the store clerks caught on and warned me to stop or they'd call the police. There was a car wash behind the store, so I simply moved to it to set up shop. Most people refused to give me money, some threatened to turn me in, but I still averaged a few dollars a day. Just enough to feed my addiction.

Extracurricular Activities

In September of 1986, I was enrolled in the 1st grade at Steven's Elementary School. My mother tried to enroll me in Kindergarten two years before, but the school district's stringent policy prohibited children under five years of age entry; my fifth birthday was less than three weeks after the start of the school year. I don't think that being a year older than my classmates ever affected me.

I was excited about attending Steven's Elementary and looked forward to each day, as was usually the case throughout elementary school. Everything was a challenge for my classmates and me. We competed to see who could finish assignments first, who'd get the highest grade, who was the best athlete at recess, and even who could eat the fastest in the cafeteria. When I paid attention and applied myself, I was a formidable opponent. Success against my peers, coupled with the praise my teachers continually bestowed upon me for academic achievements, motivated me to give my best effort for quite some time.

My father tried to pique my interest in organized sports by signing me up for T-ball shortly after I started 1st grade. At first, I was an ardent participant, but my enthusiasm diminished with each practice. My teammates were indifferent and it showed by their performance, or lack thereof. During practices, kids ran away from pop flies, took off to third after getting a base hit, and skipped bases. The kids I played with during recess at school were fiery and competitive, my T-ball team was the polar opposite.

It was during our second official game when I decided that T-ball wasn't for me. One of my teammates struck out with the bases loaded to end our comeback rally. I just couldn't fathom how anyone could miss a ball placed on a tee—THREE CONSECUTIVE TIMES!! Actually, I might've stayed on the team had my father been able to attend my practices and games. He always worked, though, so he couldn't make it. I never blamed him for that because I knew that if he didn't work, we wouldn't survive.

Uncle Bill showed his support when I began the 1st grade by loaning us a TRS-80 computer. He included several blank floppy disks, which I never used, and a video game called Thirteen Ghosts. The object of the game was to eat the ghosts as they appeared on the screen with a mouth-like graphic. There were thirteen levels, and the ghosts moved faster and multiplied with each progressive level. It took me about a week to beat the game. I can't make the same claim about Super Mario Bros; I never rescued the princess on the arcade, but I did when it came out on Nintendo.

One night I was smoking a joint while playing Thirteen Ghosts when my dad opened my bedroom door and tossed a can of Buglar tobacco on my bed. He said, "There's a pack of papers inside. Practice rolling with the tobacco because you're gonna be the designated roller when Steven ain't around. Don't let me catch you smoking any of those cigarettes either."

A few nights before, while we were getting high in the living room, I tried to roll a joint with the thin Zig Zag rolling papers, but kept ripping them. My dad didn't want me wasting the expensive Zig Zags, so he bought the cheap Buglar.

It's ironic that he allowed me to smoke marijuana, but I couldn't smoke a cigarette in front of him until I was 12 years old. He only let me do it then because he knew I was doing it behind his back. He didn't think that marijuana was as dangerous as tobacco.

Tammie and Mike Move In

Michael McLain, aka Mike, spent most of his life in foster homes and institutions after his mother, Lema, and my mother were imprisoned in the mid-1970s. When he was released from prison in the winter of 1986, my father let him live with us since we had more room than any of our relatives.

Mike, Lema's youngest son, was a couple of years older than Steven, so they hung out a lot back then. They liked to go cruising in our Gremlin, and they let me tag along occasionally. We were out riding around one day when we passed a young woman wearing a tight miniskirt. Mike grinned at Steven and said, "Turn around, I want me some of that!" "She's outta your league, Monkey." My brother chuckled. "I ain't tryin' to date her. Let's snatch her up and take turns on her," Mike turned to me and smiled. "You want some pussy, little Robert?" "Hell yeah!" I nodded.

Steven didn't turn around, nobody was abducted, no one was raped. My brother and I thought that Mike was joking. Years later, I reflected back and realized that Mike was dead serious. Had Steven been game, Mike would've done just as he said.

Several weeks after Mike moved in, my sister, Tammie, was remanded to my parents' custody. It had been awhile since I last saw her; it felt great to have her back home. We welcomed her home by going out to eat and renting movies.

Everyone had to make adjustments after Tammie returned home. She slept in Steven's bed, while Mike and Steven slept on couches in the living room. Since Tammie's caseworker made periodic checkups, we had to surreptitiously smoke dope for a couple of months because my dad didn't want Tammie telling on us. I slipped up once when Tammie was in the room and asked if we could burn a joint. My dad scolded, "Loose lips, sink ships!"

It Must Be Love

One time, I wasted half a day panhandling down at the car wash with no results. Resigned to the fact that I wouldn't be playing Super Mario Bros that day, I headed back to my apartment complex. As I entered the driveway, I saw a woman tossing her trash into the dumpster. This made me stop to think. Steven used to take people's garbage out for change when we were younger, there wasn't anything restricting me from doing it then.

I knocked on every door in our complex that afternoon and asked people if they needed their trash removed. At 50 cents a bag, I quickly built up a clientele, raking in an average of 10 dollars a week. Of course, most of it went to the Mario cause.

After school one afternoon, my mother said that she watched some new people move into a corner apartment earlier that day. I strolled over and knocked on their door. As I was mentally rehearsing my sales pitch, a blue-eyed girl with curly brown hair opened the door. "Yes? Her enchanting beauty unnerved me. "Uh, do you need trash, er. Can I take your, um. Do you want me to take your trash out? For money, I mean. I take trash out for money." She giggled and invited me inside. I followed her into the kitchen where she pointed me to a trash can and asked, "How much to get rid of that?" "Um, one quarter." The can was nearly full, but she was too pretty to charge full price. While I disposed of her trash, she hunted in her mother's room for a quarter. She handed it to me when I returned, then asked me if I wanted to hang out. Suddenly, Mario wasn't all that important.

We sat on her couch, listened to 80s hair bands, and got acquainted with each other. I learned that her name was Jenny, she was 15, and had just moved from the other side of Houston with her single mother and five year old brother, both of whom were at a relative's house at the time. We chatted for about an hour before I decided that Jenny was cool people and asked, "Do you smoke bud?" "Fuckin'-A I do," she exclaimed. Then she gave me a curious look and wondered, "Aren't you too young to even know what bud is?" "I know all about bud," I assured her. "My dad has a stash and I can go pinch us a joint if you want?" "Alright".

Ten minutes later, we were back on her couch, smoking a smooth-hitting joint that I impressed her by rolling, while listening to White Snake and watching cartoons. I did my Woody Woodpecker impersonation and she laughed herself to tears. Then she went into the kitchen and returned with a bag of cookies and a glass of milk and announced, "I have munchies!"

I hung out with Jenny and her little brother a lot after that. One day, a couple of weeks after I met her, we were kicking back in her apartment, getting high, when I boldly expressed my infatuation. "Jenny, you're the finest chick in the world!"

She giggled as she ran her fingers through my hair, then she kissed me on the lips. It wasn't a French kiss, it was just lips-on-lips. She then showed me her pretty smile and cooed, "You're such a cutie, Robert!"

Jenny kissed me like that many times and it always sent quivers through my body. She also teased me a lot, telling me that I could be her boyfriend when I got older. She was sitting next to me on her couch once, with her arm over my shoulders, when I asked, "Can't you be my pretend chick now? If anyone asks, I mean." "Sure, cutie. You can tell everyone that I'm your chick."

I skipped over to Jenny's apartment one afternoon and found her standing outside, yelling at a boy about my age. He had been picking on her little brother, and she was warning him to stay away from her brother and her apartment. She saw me approaching and told me to come inside as she stepped into her apartment. As I walked towards her door, the kid she'd been yelling at glared at me and challenged, "You want a piece of me?" "Listen up," I pointed at him. "Leave her brother alone." "Let's fight right now then!" He raised his fists in the air. Jenny emerged from her apartment and told me to come inside again, but I shook my head no. She folded her arms across her chest and watched as I converged on the boy, who was standing in front of her neighbors' window. Once I got about five feet from him, I took a deep breath, sprinted at him, and kicked him square in the chest, sending him through the window.

Jenny immediately pulled me into her apartment and locked the door. She hugged me and cried, "Oh my god, cutie! You kicked him good! Let's hope he doesn't tell on you!" She pulled the curtains over her windows and peeked outside to see what was going on. She said she saw the people next door walk by with the kid, then they returned with the manager and were standing in front of their apartment, looking at the broken window. Jenny closed the curtain and said, "Uh-oh, I think the manager caught me spying, she's coming this way!" There was a knock on her door. Jenny said she didn't want to answer it, but had to. The manager, a middle-aged, blonde woman with Coke-bottle glasses, stood in the doorway when Jenny opened the door. "Is that blond boy from number 21 in there?" I came to the door and Jenny stepped aside. The manager abruptly reached out, latched onto my long blond hair, and screamed, "You little bastard, you're gonna be sorry you fucked with me!"

The woman lifted me off the ground by my shirt and hair, and she carried me all the way to my apartment like that. Jenny was irate. She followed us closely, screaming at the woman the whole way. "Put him down! You can't do that to a kid! Put him down, bitch!"

Though blinding streaks of pain shot through my scalp, my heart swelled with love as Jenny defended me. At my apartment, the woman put me down, yet held onto my shirt, and pounded on my door. My mother answered the door. The woman vehemently explained what had happened, told my mother that we would have to pay for the window,

and that I wasn't allowed outside unsupervised anymore, then she stormed back to her office.

My father came home from work with Aunt Lema and Ricky that evening. Aunt Lema had moved in with Junior a couple of weeks after we moved into the apartment on Aldine Mail Route, but she still visited often and we all went out to eat on occasion. I think that's why they showed up with my dad that night. My mother told my father what had happened with me that day, while Aunt Lema listened intently. The fight and broken window were secondary issues to my father and Lema; that woman abusing me held center stage. In many respects, Lema was like my father: extremely aggressive, ill-tempered, and someone you don't want to piss off.

My father and I followed Aunt Lema to the manager's office. Aunt Lema burst through the door with her red hair flowing and angrily demanded, "What's this I hear about you pulling my nephew's hair?" "That boy broke a window, he was figh-" The aging blonde couldn't finish her sentence before Lema maneuvered her stout frame around the desk, grabbed a handful of hair, and began driving her fist into the woman's face. The manager's glasses went flying, blood splattered with each blow, and she repeatedly screamed, "Please stop!" Aunt Lema stopped punching her, slapped her across the face, then cautioned, "If you ever put your hands on one of mine again, I'll kill you. You understand me, slut?" "Yes," mumbled the manager. Lema released the manager and she immediately crawled into the corner, assumed the fetal position, and sobbed. We received a 30 day eviction notice the next day. That was the first of many times that I got us kicked out of a place.

I-45 N. Trailer Park: Spring-Summer of 1987

The Gagnasty Clan

Aunt Lema and Ricky shared a trailer with Junior's family in a trailer park about two miles north of Greens Road, off the feeder road of I-45 N. There were about 30 well-kept trailers in the park that were linked by a winding, asphalt road. We moved into a blue two bedroom trailer three lots down from Aunt Lema and her bunch.

While I've often thought of Junior and his family as being my favorite cousins, living with or around them was usually nauseating. Junior met and married Bonnie in 1979 and they had four children together—Billy Wayne, Troy, Tonya, and Rebecca. In their unorthodox relationship, Bonnie frequently worked while Junior stayed at home with their kids. The problem was that Junior laid on the couch, watched TV, and ate all day, while his children ran amok. Consequently, their home oftentimes had piles of dirty clothes scattered throughout, stacks of dirty dishes and open containers of spoiling food

everywhere, urine-laden mattresses, and parasite-ridden pets that weren't house-trained. Add all of that to their aversion to personal hygiene and you get a stench so putrid that it induces vomiting from most outsiders. Every now and then, Junior would make his kids clean their house, but it rarely got done unless Bonnie did it herself.

Billy Wayne and Troy, one and two years younger than me respectively, tried to emulate me. They applied personal hygiene and took care of their clothes when they hung out with me, but regressed when left to their own devices at home. There were many times when I'd give one a shirt or pair of pants and they'd ruin it within a week. A few years after we all lived in the trailer park off of I-45, Troy seemed to be breaking away from his family's slovenly lifestyle, but I received a picture of him in 2002 with his hair in disarray, grease stains on his shirt, and crayon scribbles on the wall in the background.

With only a couple of months left in the school year, I was enrolled in the school that Billy Wayne attended. Billy Wayne was an obese child who had difficulty containing bowel movements, which made him an easy target for ridicule by other kids. I rode the bus to and from school with him and, at first, I felt embarrassed that he was my cousin and didn't like sitting next to him.

About a week after we started riding the bus together, a few kids were needling Billy Wayne and he fell to the floor in tears. I looked down at him with his arms covering his head as he whined, and a surge of indignation shot through me. I stood up on the seat and turned to his tormentors—a couple of kids close to his age several seats behind us—then shouted, “Why don't y'all shut the fuck up! He hasn't done a damn thing to y'all and you keep ganging up on him for no reason! Keep it up and I'm gonna start making you cry!”

The bus driver told me to sit down. Billy Wayne stopped crying, pushed himself off of the floor, and put his arm over my shoulders. “You're my favorite cousin,” he proclaimed. “You're mine, too,” I assured. Several minutes later, a pretty, redheaded girl moved into the seat across the aisle from us and asked, “What's your name?” “I'm Robert, this is Billy Wayne,” I nodded at Billy Wayne. “What's your name?” “Suzy.” The girl showed me her braces. “That was brave of you. Those idiots always pick on kids they don't like.”

We talked until the bus stopped in front of her house, then she stood up to exit. She lived in a green house with a jumbo-sized trampoline in the front yard. Before she exited, she turned to us and said, “If you guys ever wanna come over and hang out, that would be cool.”

That afternoon, Billy Wayne and Troy followed me through the woods by our trailer park, around an ominous looking, algae covered swamp, and into Suzy's neighborhood. We spent the remainder of the day jumping on her trampoline with her and her friends.

It's Just a Game

One Saturday morning, my brother told me to put my shoes on because we were going for a walk. We left our trailer park and walked through the parking lots of the business buildings off of I-45. Curious about our expedition, I asked, "Where are we going?" "To the mall."

Greenspoint Mall was located on the intersection of Greens Road and I-45. When you passed by it on the freeway, the amalgamation of stores and sparkling windows looked stupendous. The news that we were actually going there put a bounce in my step.

The two mile walk with the sun scorching us soon put a hitch in my giddy-up. We had to stop a couple of times and search for water in the office buildings. When we arrived at the mall, we walked through the entire apparatus, scoping out the interesting stores, then we headed to the arcade.

The arcade in Greenspoint Mall was a spectacle to behold. Over 200 arcades were strategically situated in an expansive, dimmed room. Electronic screams, gunfire, ringing and dinging, and the smell of popcorn filled the room. There were games that you could climb into and pretend to be a driver, games with fake guns attached so that you could shoot bad guys, space games, and sports games, but the game that had the largest crowd was Super Mario Bros. Steven bought us a large cup of Dr Pepper and we joined the Mario fanatics.

Our family fell on hard times about a month later. My father was demoted at Brown-n-Root and he believed that he would soon be let go. Steven had already been fired for falling asleep on the job, but he had another job that paid 40 dollars per week and he gave my dad 30 dollars out of every paycheck to go towards our bills.

My father was sitting at the kitchen table with my mother figuring out bills one payday and, after making his calculations, he asked my mother where Steven was. My mother said he was probably on the way home from work. Dad said that all he was waiting on was Steven to pay the bills.

My dad was agitated about an hour later when Steven still hadn't showed up. He got my attention and asked, "You know where Steven could be?" "No, sir." "Where's that place you two go all the time?" Dad queried. "You know, the game place. Come on, I want you to show me where it is. Maybe he's there." I gave my dad directions as he drove. He parked in the mall parking lot and I led him to the arcade. We found Steven playing Super Mario Bros, unaware that we were behind him. My dad tapped him on the shoulder and asked, "How much money you got left?"

Steven looked paranoid when he turned and saw my father. "Uh, about two dollars." "You spent all of your check on video games?" My father was calm. "Yes, sir." The three of us walked to the car. My father and brother were in the front seat, I was in the back. Dad quietly put the key into the ignition, looked straight ahead, bit down on his

tongue and bottom lip, then smashed his hand into Steven's face about four or five times. "What the fuck is wrong with you, spending all of that money on a goddamn game!"

We rode home in silence. After my dad parked in our driveway, he hugged Steven and apologized, "I'm sorry, dude. It's just that we counted on that money and I don't know what we're gonna do. But it was your money and I shouldn't have hit ya." "It's okay, dad," Steven said through tears. "I shouldn't have spent it all, I wasn't thinking."

Our father soon lost his job and we had to move. Aunt Lema and Junior had moved into a trailer on the east side of Houston a few weeks before, so we packed up and moved in with them.

Cloverleaf-Gainesville Street: Summer of 1987

Peckerwoodville

The neighborhood that best represents the ethos of my family is Cloverleaf—fondly referred to as "Cloverdump," or simply as "The Dump." Composed of shabby apartment buildings, trailers, and houses interlinked by flourishing patches of woods on every block, Cloverleaf was a predominantly White slum with a growing Hispanic population when we moved there in 1987. Drugs could be found on most streets, prostitutes advertised at all hours on Nimitz Street, and roaming thieves and dope fiends made people keep a close eye on their property. You walked the streets at your own risk after dark.

Aunt Lema, Ricky, Mike, and Junior's family lived in a three-bedroom trailer off of Gainesville Street in Cloverleaf. When my family moved in, the already snug living arrangements became quite congested. There were sleeping pallets spread out all over the trailer each morning, and you had to watch your step or someone would get a rude awakening. I made my pallet in a corner of the living room where there wasn't any traffic.

When I wasn't sleeping or eating, I wasn't inside that nasty trailer. Billy Wayne, Troy, and I met a boy about my age named Jason who lived at the end of our block in one of the better looking houses in Cloverleaf. A drainage ditch separated Jason's backyard from the lot where we lived, and the four of us could be found catching crawfish and tadpoles in it most days.

Junior and Steven materialized on the street above us while we were knee deep in water one afternoon. Junior pointed to the old coffee can that I put my crawfish in and asked, "Whatcha catchin'?" "Crawdads," I replied. "Oh yeah," Junior rubbed his round belly. "Them crawdaddies are some good eatin'. Bring 'em up here." I grabbed my can, stepped out of the water, and climbed up the embankment. Junior reached into the can, pulled out a crawfish, plucked its head and extremities off, and examined it for a second before saying, "I need some peanut butter before I eat it." Steven took the decapitated

crawfish from Junior and declared, “You’re a pussy,” before tossing it into his mouth and swallowing it. Ewww!” we collectively cried.

My brother vomited on the way to our trailer and was sick the remainder of the day. Junior called him, “Waterhead” and, if I’m not mistaken, that was when he got that nickname.

Jason had a sister about a year older than me named Cindy. She sometimes sat on the street and watched as we scoured the water in search of crawfish. She was cute with her large, brown eyes and long, brown hair that she kept in a ponytail. I was about to descend into the ditch one morning when Cindy stopped me and asked, “Do you want to come to my house and watch MTV instead?” “Sure!” I exclaimed. Jason always talked about watching cable TV, I wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity. “I want to come, too,” Billy Wayne said. “No way,” Cindy shook her head. “You stink. Only Robert can come.”

I told Billy Wayne and Troy that I’d come back in an hour and crawfish with them. Troy was cool about it, but Billy Wayne scowled and followed us to their house. Cindy let me inside and told Billy Wayne to get out of her yard. He simply sat down in the grass and pouted.

Jason and I kicked back on their living room couch watching music videos, while Cindy went into the kitchen and got sodas. He told me that his sister liked me, I just shrugged. Cindy returned with Cokes and sat down next to me. A few minutes later, she ran her fingers through my hair and whispered, “You have silky hair, Robert.” “Thanks.”

The sound of their front door opening made me jump. Billy Wayne walked through the door and pleaded, “Let me just stand here, I won’t say a word.” Cindy jumped up and screamed at Billy Wayne, telling him to get out. She tried to push him outside, but he outweighed her by at least 70 pounds and wouldn’t budge. I thought he was screwing things up for me, so I got off the couch and told him to leave. When he refused, I punched him in the stomach, kicked him in the leg, then shoved him out of the front door. A BB gun leaned against the wall by the entrance and I picked it up and pointed it at him. “Get your fat ass out of here! They don’t want you in their house!” He ran down the street crying. I shut the door and resumed my position on the couch. Cindy’s fingers soon found my hair again, to my delight.

A knock at the front door disturbed us about 10 minutes later. Thinking that it was Billy Wayne, I told them I’d handle it. I opened the door ready to kick some ass and was startled to find my father. He looked calm when he asked, “Did you point a gun at Billy Wayne?” “No, sir.” He glanced inside and saw the BB gun leaning against the wall. He bit his tongue and bottom lip, pulled me out of the house and into their yard, smacked me in the head several times, then kicked me in the ass and told me to go home. None of that hurt, physically, but it embarrassed me because Cindy and Jason stood in the doorway watching the entire time. Back at the trailer, my dad called me into the back room and closed the door. He looked grave as he asked, “You know why I hit you?” “Yes, sir.” “Don’t

you ever point a gun at family. We stick together, you hear me?” “Yes, sir.” Lesson learned.

The Cloverleaf Hillbillies

My father caught Mike kissing Tammie a few days later. As it turns out, they had been sneaking around having sex since we lived in the Aldine Mail Route apartments. Surprisingly, my dad didn’t lay a finger on Mike, he just told my sister to go inside, then warned Mike to stay away from his daughter.

We were all in the living room moments later when Mike reasoned, “She ain’t your daughter, ain’t nothin’ wrong with it.” “I don’t give a damn what you think,” my father shouted. “It ain’t happening!” “Mike’s right, Sam,” Lema said. “It ain’t incest.” “Goddammit!” My father was as enraged as I’d ever seen him. “I’m tired of the sick shit that goes on in this family! Even I’m guilty! We gotta put a stop to this shit now, it has gone on far too long!

Aunt Lema called my father, Mike, and Tammie into her bedroom. They were in there for over an hour while everyone else was reticent in the living room. When they filed out of Lema’s bedroom, my father left the trailer and drove off for awhile. I don’t know what was said in that room, but Mike and Tammie were together after that episode.

The perverted acts that have stigmatized my family have a long, revolting history. Rumor has it that Wayne McLain Senior molested his children, Christine, Nancy, Marcy, Mike, and possibly Junior, too. Mike, in turn, grew up and molested Billy Wayne, possibly Tonya. Mike also sexually abused Samantha, my sister’s oldest child, and Stephanie, my sister’s youngest child. Billy Wayne was sent to prison in 2001 for sexually assaulting one of John’s sons, perpetuating the cycle of sickness. Sadly, these are just the incidents that I’m aware of.

While Mike was correct—my sister isn’t my father’s daughter so Mike isn’t biologically related to her—there was still an element of creepiness to his relationship with Tammie. I never embraced it, especially considering that my sister is mentally challenged.

Cloverleaf—Corpus Christi Street Apartments: Summer of 1987

The Flea Bag Motel

Steven befriended two brothers named David and James Terry while we lived in Cloverleaf when I was a toddler. According to Steven, the three of them tore up the streets of Cloverleaf chasing girls and smoking dope back then. My brother was reunited

with James, a slim guy with long, bright blond hair, in the summer of 1987. My cousin John had been peddling pot with James, and the two showed up at the trailer on Gainesville.

In addition to selling pot, James ran a tree service the entire time that I knew him. He hired my father, brother, Junior, and Mike at just the right time that summer because Lema was evicted for allowing all of us to live with her. Lema and Ricky moved to Aransas Pass, Texas, the rest of us rented an apartment one block over.

We called the place The Flea Bag Motel because the sandy parking lot was a haven for fleas, which weren't deterred by the decaying, wooden walls of the apartments. There wasn't an air conditioner, and that exacerbated living with Junior's family; although, Bonnie was out of work, so she and my mother minimized the damage wreaked by my cousins.

The prominent experience from this place occurred shortly after Billy Wayne, Troy, and I met two girls about my age. The five of us were in one of the girls' apartment playing "doctor" when her mother walked in on us and found us all naked.

My father was informed and he made Billy Wayne, Troy, and I take our shorts off and lie face down, side by side, on a mattress. Then he removed his belt and spanked us one at a time. I was the last to be whipped, so I got to hear Billy Wayne and Troy's cries of pain before my dad put welts on my ass. It hurt to sit down for a couple of days after that.

Channelview—Ashland Road Trailer Park: Fall of 1987- November of 1987

A Friend with Weed is a Friend Indeed

Fortunately, we only lived in The Flea Bag Motel for about a month before moving to Channelview, a suburb just East of Cloverleaf. At least half of Channelview consists of middle-class houses, the rest are decent trailer parks and apartment buildings. The trailer park that we moved into had four rows of trailers conjoined by three gravel roads, with a Laundromat at the entrance for the park's residents. Our trailer was a spacious three bedroom with two baths.

Shortly after we moved in, I was enrolled in the 2nd grade at McMullen Elementary School, while Billy Wayne and Troy were enrolled in another elementary school to accommodate their special education needs. Junior's family is exemplary of the fact that mental capacity is heritable. Junior and Bonnie have below average intelligence and all four of their children required special education throughout school. I was reared in an identical milieu to theirs, yet I breezed through normal classes.

I became cognizant of the poor quality of my clothes for the first time while attending McMullen. Half of the kids there came from middle-class families and their clothing, brand-new and crisp, reflected that. My faded, secondhand clothes made me self-conscious.

Jeremy was a kid that I sat next to in class and rode the bus with. We played together at recess and talked about cartoons, cars, and rock 'n' roll. He didn't seem to notice the difference in our clothing, either. We were riding the bus home one afternoon when I asked him if he wanted to come over and hang out at my trailer park. He agreed and we both got off the bus at my stop. After I informed my mom that I was home and introduced her to my friend, Jeremy and I went outside and found Billy Wayne and Troy. They were climbing trees in a wooded area that separated our trailer park from a gully. We climbed the tree that they were in and I introduced them to Jeremy. Always the show-off, I hollered out, "Watch this!"

I climbed onto a branch about 40 feet off of the ground and slithered towards the end of it. Halfway there, the branch began to bend. I then twisted my body around and hung from it by my hands, then walked my hands down the branch until it carried me all the way to the ground. I released the limb and it shot into the air. Troy imitated me, and Jeremy followed suit. When Billy Wayne moved towards the branch to give it a try, Troy called up, "Don't do it, fat boy! You'll break the branch and kill yourself!" We all played in the woods for about an hour before Jeremy said he had to go home. He said he could follow the gully to his neighborhood. With nothing else to do, I walked with him.

The ditch led us to a section of Sterling Green, the richest neighborhood in Channelview. Jeremy lived in a two story house with tan siding that couldn't have been more than a couple of years old. "This is your pad, dude?" I was astonished. "Yeah, my pops has a lot of dough," he said nonchalantly. Then he asked, "Say, do you want to smoke some pot?" "Hell yeah!" "Alright, I'm gonna take you inside and introduce you to my mom. You distract her while I go get my pop's weed."

His mother was a brunette and she wore a tight sweat suit over a lithe frame. After Jeremy introduced us, he left the room. I told the woman that her house was the best that I'd ever been inside, then we conversed about school until Jeremy returned. He asked me if I wanted to check out his boat. I nodded and followed him out of the house, getting one last look at his mom on the way out.

Jeremy led me into his garage, behind a huge boat, then pulled out a large ziplock bag filled with buds and plastic bags. He looked paranoid when he handed it to me and said, "Put some in a bag, I gotta go get some papers and a lighter, I'll be right back."

As soon as he left, I filled a bag up and stuffed it in my sock. Then I put some in another bag and sealed the large bag back up. He returned with rolling papers and a lighter, took the large bag of dope and put it into a drawer in a worktable, and we left the garage. We

walked back to the gully where I rolled a joint. Once we smoked it, I told him I'd see him at school and walked back home with my eyes red and a smile on my face.

My mom was sitting in a chair in the living room when I walked through the front door. I hopped on the couch and asked, "Do we have any smoke?" "Nope, but your daddy's supposed to get some after work." "Well, how about me and you smoke one now," I said as I pulled the bag from my sock.

We smoked a joint, then my mom told me to stash the bag so we could smoke it during the day while my dad was at work and smoke dad's dope after he came home. My mother was a true pothead.

Don't Shit in Your Own Backyard, Part I

One day, I decided to start up my garbage removal business again. I recruited Billy Wayne and Troy as workers and we hit all the trailer parks on Ashland Road, making enough money to get full on candy and sodas and play video games several times a week at the store on the corner of Woodforest and Dell Dale. Striving to be the consummate professional, I took one of my dad's receipt books, that he used as James Terry's bookkeeper, and wrote out a receipt to all of my customers.

There was a middle-aged couple who lived in our trailer park, but they always seemed to be gone. When I saw them pulling into their driveway one day, I ran to their trailer and met them as they got out of their car. "Excuse me. I'm Robert with 'Robert and Cousins' Trash Company.' Would you folks care to have your trash disposed of?" They smiled and the lady asked, "How much do you charge, Robert?" "Fifty cents a bag." "Come on inside, I got three or four you can have," the woman said.

After I dropped their trash into the dumpster, I stopped at my house and grabbed my receipt book, then ran back to their house and wrote them out a receipt. The woman thanked me and promised to become a steady customer.

About a week later, Troy told me that he found a chainsaw and he needed my help to get it. We had an electric chainsaw that we cut branches with, but the cord barely reached outside out back door. My dad wouldn't let us mess with the gas saws that he used working with James, so the thought of having one of my own got my attention. Troy showed me to the trailer where the middle-aged couple lived and pointed under the front porch where the saw was sitting. I told him to keep an eye out for me while I crawled under and stole the saw. As I was pulling it out, my arm knocked a bucket over and the woman I'd given a receipt to a week before looked out her door and caught me. I dropped the chainsaw and took off running towards my trailer, Troy was right in front of me the whole way.

Junior and my dad were lounging in the living room when we entered. Troy went into the back bedroom, I went into the kitchen and made me something to drink. My heart began to race moments later when I heard a loud rap at the door. My dad rose from the couch and answered the door. I could see the middle-aged woman on the porch holding a piece of paper in her hand. "Is this where Robert Pruett lives?" "Yep, what can I do for you?" my dad asked. "He was just under my trailer trying to steal my chainsaw. He gave me this receipt." She handed it to my dad. "That's how I knew he lived here." "I'm sorry about that ma'am," my father said. "I'll take care of him. You won't have this problem again." Dad shut the door and walked up to me by the kitchen sink. He handed me the receipt that the woman had given him. When he bit down on his bottom lip and tongue, I tensed up. He plowed his palm into my head, knocking me against the kitchen counter. I tried to escape, but he caught me by the shirt and hit me a few more times. Then he yelled at me, "What's your goddamn problem, idiot? Stealing people's shit? You don't shit in your own backyard, you hear me?" "Yes, sir!" I answered. I didn't catch his meaning right then, but later on, after I regained my composure, I understood: Don't steal from your neighbors.

Recurring Themes

Several months later, Wayne McLain Sr showed up in a Lincoln. Wayne was an unusually large man who always wore a giant cowboy hat. He came to Houston to move Junior's family down to Aransas Pass, which is exactly what my parents wanted. My mother was tired of cleaning up after my cousins, a task that would drive anyone to drink. We were all glad to finally have our own place again.

It wasn't long after Wayne Sr moved Junior's family out that my cousin Ronnie was released from the Arizona State Penitentiary. Steven drove my mother and me to James Terry's house off of Victoria Street in Cloverleaf after work one night. My father was sitting out on the front porch with a medium-built man with a balding head and a gap between his front teeth when we arrived. As I walked up to them, my father nodded at me and informed Ronnie, "That's my son Robert."

Ronnie moved in with us and began working with James Terry along with my father, brother, and Mike. Unfortunately, Ronnie hadn't learned very much from his stint in an Arizona prison. Not long after he moved in with us, Ronnie stole a truck and used it to rob stores with Mike. They'd take a heavy-duty chain and attach it to a store's safe and the truck's frame, then rip the safe out of the ground. They were apprehended after a high-speed chase one night, and both went to prison for robbery. Sadly, Mike left my sister when she was a couple of months pregnant.

On November 22, 1987, Steven turned 18 and was eligible to receive the settlement from being hit by a car in the early 1980s. He received a check for \$3100.00 in January of 1988. He and my father had over \$1000.00 between them from working with James Terry and, after adding that to Steven's settlement, they decided to make a down payment on a brown, $\frac{3}{4}$ ton Ford truck. The next day we loaded the truck up with all of our property and headed to Aransas Pass, Texas.

Down South

It's a trip, some of the things I remember. While I don't claim to have an eidetic memory, I can recall odd dates, every institutional number ever assigned to me, chronologically order every cell I've ever lived in (close to one-hundred in sixteen years) and sometimes describe in great detail certain seemingly trivial events from the past. Like the move in south Texas in November of 1987. We loaded up our truck with our belongings. My dad drove, my mother rode shotgun and my brother and I were in the club cab with my dog Bud. It was dusk as the lights of Houston faded to rustic countryside. I felt a sense of adventure as I gazed out the window at the rows of wheat and corn fields and old farm roads. My dad spoke of Corpus Christi and Aransas Pass, reminiscing on the days of his youth. My mother crocheted a blanket. Steven perused a car manual. Every so often a joint was passed around. I got stoned. Our family didn't know we were coming so I kept imagining how surprised Billy Wayne and Troy would be to see me but eventually I fell asleep, listening to my dad sing along to a classic country station.

We stopped at a red light just inside the city limits of Aransas Pass. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. The salty smell of the Gulf of Mexico permeated the truck's cab and caressed my nostrils. A convenience store was adorned with shrimp nets covered in sea shells with an anchor directly above the entrance. Dad informed us that Aransas Pass was home to a large population of fisherman and shrimpers, and its economy revolved around the shrimping industry. When we passed a sign declaring Aransas Pass the "Shrimp Capital of the World" my dad joked, "More like the Asshole of the World!" Wayne McLain Senior owned a piece of land on Gile Road, a dirt road in the rural part of town. There was a white house and several trailer homes on the property. Uncle Wayne lived in the largest, and easily the nicest, of the trailers. Uncle Wayne's son Junior lived in the house with his family. Unfortunately, Billy Wayne and Troy were asleep when we arrived so I crashed on a fold-out bed in one of the smaller trailers that Uncle Wayne loaned us until we could find our own place.

The following day Uncle Wayne drove Junior, my dad, my brother and I around town. We rode in his brand new Lincoln Continental, and his 6'4", four-hundred pound plus frame completely filled the driver's side. He donned a cowboy hat and spoke with a southern drawl. He had lots of connections around town and offered advice to my father

and brother on how to invest their money, where we should live, et cetera. To this day, I wonder how Uncle Wayne was able to live in such relative comfort. He had deep pockets, owned nice vehicles and owned various properties, yet I have no recollection of him ever working. Rumor has it he had ties with several prominent attorneys in Corpus Christi, and he supplied them with clients who had injured themselves offshore on the shrimp boats. He was commissioned for cases settled.

After several hours of searching for a place to live Uncle Wayne pulled into a lot on the outskirts of town and planted the seeds of our dream.

Pruett's Trailer Park - FM 1069

November of 1987 - Summer 1988

FM 1069 divides Aransas Pass and Rockport, Texas. It's out in the middle of nowhere, a good ten miles from the center of both towns in either direction. The property we rented was on the Rockport side, although I went to school in Aransas Pass using the Gile Road address the first month or so. I wanted to hang out with Billy Wayne. The property was a five acre lot that had a maroon two-bedroom house and four trailer homes in disrepair. The idea was to renovate the trailers and rent them out to shrimpers. The reality was that it took most of our money to make just two of them livable and they were too far away from town to attract potential renters. When I reflect on ur dream of owning our own trailer park I can't help but smile and think of George Strait's song "Oceanfront Property in Arizona."

The land there was covered in thick brush and riotous undergrowth when we first moved in. It was a utopia for me and my cousins. We used machetes to chop the trees and wild growth off of the driveways and trailers. We cut trails into the woods where we built forts and tree houses. Later that year, after Junior went to prison for trying to sell cocaine to an undercover cop, Bonnie and the kids moved into one of our trailers. My cousins and I had the whole summer to explore the woods and get lost in our games and adventures.

One day we discovered a small pond deep in the forest. For days we made our way to Clay Pond, as we dubbed it. We had to crawl through twenty dense feet of brush to get there, but we intentionally left the path uncut so only we could get there. The south Texas sun scorched us most days, so swimming in Clay Pond was a welcome respite. We built a small raft using rope and boards from an old pile of lumber that had been left on our property. "King of the Ship" was a favored game of ours. The object was to see who could stay on the raft the longest while the others attempted to knock you off. It was all careless fun until Troy and I noticed movement under the raft one afternoon. Billy Wayne had already jumped into the water and was splashing around. I told him to get out of the

water—quickly! From the bank, I used a long stick to tip the raft over and found a nest of water moccasins! We never swam in Clay Pond again.

Truthfully, the living conditions weren't very comfortable on FM 1069. I hated drinking the well water. We didn't have air conditioning either, and the box fans Mom set up were no match for the blistering days that summer. Worst of all were the fleas. There was sand everywhere, and the fleas lived in it. No matter what we did to try to get rid of them they invariably returned. Most nights it was almost impossible to sleep through the fleas tormenting you.

This Bud's for Me

When we were living on Ashland in Channelview, my dad and brother brought home a black and white pit bull puppy and told me it was mine. My cousin John had been breeding pit bulls for years, and the puppy given to me was a descendant of one of the dogs John had kept for himself. I'd grown up around dogs my entire life, but for one reason or another I'd never had my own dog. I remember watching my puppy's tiny body tense up as he stood his ground and barked furiously, exhibiting the ferocity exemplary of his breed. He loved me immediately. I rolled around on the carpet of our living room with him half the night, and he followed me everywhere I went. At one point my mom asked what I wanted to call him. I took a toke from the joint that was being passed around and blew smoke in my dog's face. He sneezed, coughed, shook his head and then growled. I laughed and said, "Bud."

In every way Bud became a part of the family, as dogs do. We kept Bud clean and housetrained him, so Mom didn't mind him hanging out on the couch or sleeping with me. Most nights he did. Out off of FM 1069, Bud was my companion. He followed me through the woods and acted like a watchdog. Bud would warn me of any potential threats. But before Bud was even a year old, tragedy struck. I was in the house one day when I heard a yelp. In a flash, I was outside looking for Bud. Bonnie ran towards me crying and screaming, "Hurry! Some motherfucker in a truck hit Bud!" I ran as fast as I could, and when I made it to the road I found Bud. His small body was broken, covered in blood, lifeless. I tried to help him as I sobbed uncontrollably, but my family pulled me away. Steven jumped in the truck, and Bonnie pointed him in the direction of the truck that had just killed Bud. Bonnie said she saw the guy swerve about ten feet off of the road and hit Bud, as if he was trying to hit him on purpose. Hearing this only increased my anger and deepened my pain. Everyone was in tears by the time my brother returned and said the person who hit Bud had too much of a head start; he'd never catch him

Bud's death was my first experience with the permanent separation from a being I loved. The shock and pain of Bud being there one day, alive and vibrant, then suddenly

dead and gone the next devastated me. My family tried to console me. They told me Bud was in Heaven. They smoked a joint with me. They helped me bury him. My dad assured me that if he ever caught the sonofabitch who killed Bud, he'd run him over. Despite the sympathy from my family, the sting of death lingered for a long time. Anytime I visited Bud's grave or thought about him I cried. I tried to fathom death. What really happens when we die? Will I really see Bud again when I die?

A year later I found a dead bird under a power line and examined it. Again I thought of Bud and cried. He was a good dog. He'd never bitten anyone. How could a loving God let my dog die? I cursed God that day for allowing the bird and Bud to die.

Troubled Times

The only person who ever rented a trailer from us was Emma Bradshaw. The Bradshaws were a family of inbreds that lived about a mile down the road. Junior called them "the Dots" because they reminded him of our mentally handicapped cousin, Mar, who was fond of rocking in his chair with a comb in his hand while repeating "Dot, dot, dot." Emma was in her twenties, and she received a monthly government check for her mental deficiencies. Junior and Steven took Emma out to a bar, got her drunk and high, and after all was said and done they'd convinced her to move in.

Rumor has it that most of my uncles, my cousins and brother slept with Emma. I heard them joke that she was like a door knob—everyone gets a turn. It sounds like they were taking advantage of her, but the truth is, Emma was the smartest of her family and every bit as sharp as most of the guys she was sleeping with. Still, it was disgusting to hear them joke that way.

Things got rough for us once Emma decided to move to Austin with her ex-boyfriend. My father and brother couldn't find work and no one wanted to rent a trailer. With no income something had to be done in a hurry. Uncle Wayne came through with two Hefty bags of marijuana. Apparently his connections ran deeper than "some lawyers." I still have a vivid recollection of being in Emma's old trailer with my cousins John and Mike, my brother and father when John pulled out an impressive foot long bud of redhair weed. He passed it around for everyone to admire. He said it was too pretty to smoke, that we should frame it, but Dad's plan was to sell the pot and use the money to get by until he could find a job or we could find renters. He didn't think it was wise to peddle pot in Aransas Pass or Rockport (remember, he didn't like shitting in his backyard). Particularly, he didn't want to sell it to people he didn't know. He thought the smartest move was to sell it in large quantities to our old friend in Houston, James Terry.

Houston is about three hundred miles from Rockport. My dad didn't want to risk driving the dope that far and getting pulled over. He'd be charged with drug-trafficking

if he got caught, and drug trafficking is a federal offense with huge penalties in Texas. His solution was to fill up a suitcase with pot and change of clothes for each of us and take me hitchhiking with him. He reasoned that if he took his eight year old son along, no cop in the world would be suspicious enough to search the suitcase. Furthermore, folks would be more inclined to pick him up on the road with me by his side. How many people could be heartless enough to let a little boy walk in the south Texas heat?

We walked from one side of Rockport to the other before raising our thumbs. Within minutes a balding older man in a beat up pick-up truck pulled to the side of the road and waved us inside. Dad told him our engine blew on the way to Houston. The old man took us as far as Victoria, gave my dad twenty bucks and told us to be careful.

Once again we stuck our thumbs out, this time on Highway 59. An obese man close to my dad's age gave us a lift in his big rig. He and my father got along well, talking up a storm the rest of the way to Houston. He dropped us off at a truck stop by the freeway. We walked through a ghetto in downtown Houston. I grew nervous as all the black faces along the embankments and graffiti covered overpass glared at us. My dad, the perennial jokester said, "Just keep walking and look straight ahead. We should be fine as long as they don't find out what's in the suitcase because then they'll be on us like watermelon."

April Fool's

After a couple of trips to James Terry's we ran out of pot. The money made didn't last either, and once again we struggled. To make matters worse, a couple of men from the dealership in Houston where we got our truck found us. They'd contacted Grandma Kelly, and she gave them our address. I was out in the woods playing when they showed up. When I got back, I stepped into the driveway, machete in hand, to find my father and brother leaning up against the front of our truck with two strangers. They all had beers and were in the middle of what sounded like an amicable conversation. One of the repo men patted my dad on the shoulder and said, "Sam, I gotta take the truck." "Welp," my dad said. He took a swallow of beer and looked the guy in the eye. "I ain't gonna let you do no such thing, Mister." "Now, Sam. It's what's right. You ain't made a payment in months." "Boy, you getcha ass off my property. If I catch you around my place again, or anywhere near this truck, I'll feed you to Dynamite."

Dynamite was one of Cousin John's prize-winning fight dogs. We kept them on our property because John couldn't have them at his apartment in Aransas Pass. Dynamite was extremely vicious and looked quite menacing prowling back and forth the length of his chain while he watched the strangers. They left when my dad threatened them, but we noticed their car pass our place many times over the span of a week. My mother even

saw them parked down the road once. Still, my dad felt safe because he'd chain Dynamite to the truck's steering wheel every night.

I'll never forget the morning of April 1, 1988. My mom cooked breakfast while my dad and brother watched TV in the living room. I went outside and found Dynamite walking freely with his chain around his neck. My first thought was that Dynamite had somehow gotten loose from the tree we normally tied him to, but suddenly I snapped and realized our truck was gone. Later, we figured out that the repo men had been feeding Dynamite meat while we were away. It was their way of befriending him. I rushed inside and shouted, "Our truck is gone! They took our truck!" Everyone laughed at me. "Ha! Ha! April Fool's." "Like we were just born this morning." "No, seriously. Go look!"

I was beside myself, upset that they thought I was joking. No one budged for about ten minutes. They simply refused to believe me. I was exasperated and finally sat down and acted as if I didn't care. Finally, my dad got off the couch and peeked out the window. "He's not joking. They got the truck." "I told you so!" I jumped up victoriously. The joy of being right was short-lived though. Their concerned looks reminded me that we were in a world of hurt without any transportation in the middle of nowhere.

The Redfish Camp

We're a family of musicians. My father played guitar and often drew a crowd with his melodic voice. He has a southern twang that's reminiscent of Hank Williams Senior. Marina, my brother's ex girlfriend, said he sounds just like Willie Nelson. Uncle Wayne was a virtuoso of the harmonica and played the steel guitar. Most of his boys played one instrument or another, and everyone could carry a tune well enough. Family get-togethers were always entertaining, with lots of singing and dancing well into the night.

My father taught Steven and I how to play the guitar. We learned the basics playing old country and western. We sat around for hours watching him play, imitating his finger formations. His fingertips were calloused from years of playing and soon ours were too. He said, "You can play any country song with the basic cords D,G, and A... sometimes a little C or E."

In those days I grew close to my country roots. Today, I'm embarrassed and repulsed by the backward attitude/views most often associated with country music. The whole hang'em-high-and-let-God-cut-'em-down approach, not to mention the myriad of antiquated ideals that the majority of country culture still holds so dear, is a huge turn-off for me. But I still have fond memories hanging out with the family, listening to my dad play and sing, being so proud of his skills and wanting to emulate him in every way.... Or it could simply be that I just love the heart-wrenching passion of a good tear-jerking country song.

There was a bar about 10 miles away from our place on FM 1069 called The Redfish Camp. It got its name from the bay, replete with redfish, which it was built next to. When things got really bad for us financially my father began frequenting The Redfish Camp. His initial intentions were to meet people there in hopes of finding work. The couple that owned the place were sympathetic so they gave him a little money a few nights a week for sleeping in the bar to ward off burglars. The place had been broken into several times. Soon, though, the biggest attraction for my father became the free beer (and sometimes food) he received for singing every night.

My dad sometimes allowed me to hang out with him at The Redfish Camp. I liked playing pool there, watching him entertaining the crowd and mixing it up with the regulars. My dad really had talent. There's a story he tells from his days in the Missouri State Penitentiary. The prison was over 70% black, and about 90% of the participants in the talent shows were too. He didn't think he stood a chance, but signed up anyway. He took a guitar and got up on stage and did one of his favorite country songs. He received an ovation, which he thought was more out of respect than an appreciation for his performance.

After he was finished he went back to his cell and kicked back on his bunk. Not much later a black friend of his ran down the run looking for him. "Tex! Man, go pick up your two cartons of smokes – you won 2nd place!"

One night, as I was sitting on a bar stool at the bar, Dad called me onto the stage. We smoked some weed before we arrived at the bar so the full house didn't intimidate me. He handed me his cup of beer and told me to chug it as he introduced me on the microphone. All the patrons clapped after I drained the beer and showed them my bitter-beer face! He announced that we were going to do a song and handed me the mic. At first I was confused because I didn't know many songs. Then he began picking the tune and I knew immediately which one he had in mind. Right on time I sang,

"Up in smoke

Is where my money goes

In my lungs

And sometimes up my nose

When troubled times begin to bother me

I take a toké

And all my cares

Go up in smoke"

The entire place erupted in cheers and applause. I was hugged by the ladies and smacked on the back by the men. Everyone gave me a dollar! I came away with about 40 bucks. Dad let me keep five!

Finger Lickin' Good

The weeks turned into months without my father or brother finding real jobs. My dad practically lived at The Redfish Camp the summer of 1988, while we barely survived. For the longest we ate only beans and potatoes every single night, no meat whatsoever. We used to joke that we never ate the same thing on successive night because one night we'd have "beans and taters" and the next "taters and beans!" You needed a sense of humor to get through each day back then.

Soon, I took matters into my own hands. The Evans' owned the property next to ours. They raised chickens, and their roosters woke us up every morning. One day I was out in the woods with Dynamite, not far from the fence that separated our properties, when Dynamite broke away from me. He crawled through the fence, darted into the Evans' yard, and caught a chicken! Thankfully, no one was home or he would've likely been shot. I hopped the fence and grabbed Dynamite by the collar, pulled him back through the fence, dead chicken clenched between his teeth.

As he ate his catch a thought occurred to me: surely the Evans wouldn't miss one more chicken, right? I jumped the fence back into their yard and quickly captured another chicken. I brought it home and chopped its head off with a machete, then plucked all of its feathers and washed it in hot water. I presented it to my mom and she demanded to know where I got it from? I lied and said it was in the woods... on our property. I'm not sure if she believed me but she took the chicken and prepared it with our meal that night. It tasted terrible, unlike any chicken I'd ever tried, and no one ate it. I later learned that you must bleed the chicken right before you can eat it!

I stole at least five more chickens, and quite a few eggs, from the Evans' before Ms. Evans let my mother know that she suspects our dogs of eating her chickens. Ms. Evans warned her that she'd shoot first and ask questions later if she caught any of them in her yard. My mom forbade me from stealing any more of their chickens, but that didn't stop me from raiding the other yards up and down FM 1069, stealing eggs and chickens!

In the Genes?

Billy Wayne's head appeared at the entrance of my tree house as a I hammered a nail into the foundation. My foot was on his head before he could enter. "What do you think you're doing, Billy Fuck? I told you you can't come in until the floor is sturdy enough to hold your fat ass!" "You been working on it all day," He whined, tried to push my foot away. "Ain't it strong enough for me yet?" "I told you I would let you know when we can test it! Now get the fuck down!" He climbed down, complaining the whole way. He yelled

at me from the ground. "I'm gonna tell Uncle Sam on you. He'll make you let me in." "My dad's home?" Yup, and I'm tellin."

I hadn't seen my dad in a few days. I dropped the hammer and ran home, hoping to catch him before he left. My parents were arguing when I walked through the door. Without another word my dad walked past me and out the door. My mother was on the couch crying. "What's wrong, Mom?" Why don't you go ask your piece of shit daddy!"

I found my father outside sitting at the picnic table. I sat next to him and tentatively asked, "Why's Mom crying?" "Sometimes a man has to make a tough decision, Son. I made one today. This ol' gal that comes to the bar has a daddy that runs a business. I figure if I move in with her I can go to work for him and funnel money to you and your momma. It's the only thing I know to do at this point." His words didn't sink in at first. Maybe because I was naïve or perhaps didn't want to believe my ears. My father had just told me he was leaving us to live with another woman. He hugged me and said he hoped I understood. I didn't understand. I shook away from him and went to comfort my mother.

Close to a week passed without any word from my father. Mom was a nervous wreck, constantly worrying how we'd make it. More than once she mentioned finding a phone and calling her mother in Houston to ask her if we could move in. Steven thought he would have a better chance of finding a steady job in Houston.

I was awakened by loud voices coming from our living room. I went to investigate. My father, mother and Steven were talking with a strange man named Bob. They were in a frenzy trying to figure something out. My father took command. "Look, we ain't got the time to pussyfoot around. Hurry the fuck up and pack some clothes and get your asses in the car."

As we piled into Bob's car I noticed my father clutching his side, grimacing. There was blood on his shirt. We rode down the road and Steven related the events of the night: My brother caught a ride to The Redfish Camp earlier in the night in hopes of talking sense to our father. Upon his arrival, our father was two sheets to the wind and in the midst of a heated exchange with the father of the woman my dad left us for, Whiskers. Steven pulled our father outside to calm him down, but Whiskers followed them and continued to mouth off. My father unfolded his Buck knife and stabbed Whiskers multiple times before my brother and Bob could break them up. Dad said they were the only ones outside so he turned the knife on himself to make it look like self-defense. Bob directed my father and brother to his car and drove them to our place.

Bob drove us to his house in Rockport. He must've really thought of my father as a true friend because he allowed us to stay with him for a couple of weeks while my father healed and the heat died down. In the interim my brother, mother and I made trips back to our place on FM 1069 with Bob to collect things. My father wasn't arrested or even questioned in the stabbing of Whiskers.

Is aggression/violence innate or learned behavior? This is a question I've asked myself many times in attempting to understand my father, one of the most violent men I've ever met. He wasn't an abusive father or husband; his violence was directed towards those he felt were a threat to him or his family. Unless he was drunk, then it extended to anyone who "contested" him. Was he born that way? His father beat him and his family religiously. Dad often described Grandpa Pruett as "one mean sombitch," a sentiment echoed by many in our family. Of my father's siblings only Aunt Lema shared his mean streak. Uncle Dewey and Bill are very passive. I never knew Leroy, he killed himself in the 1960's, but dad says he was a scrapper, yet mild-mannered.

It's possible that there's a genetic component to my father's aggressive disposition, but I've come to believe that it's mostly a conditioned behavior. He spent his youth, and the majority of his life, in correctional facilities. In Texas prisons only the strong survive. The weak are beaten, robbed, raped and exploited at every turn. I learned early on that you must fight in here. As soon as you step off the bus from the free world all eyes are on you. The predators look for any sign of weakness and they challenge you repeatedly. If you fight back, whether you win or not, they tend to redirect their focus on those who won't fight back. You must meet any form of perceived disrespect with aggression. After a time it becomes reflexive to lash out at those you consider a threat.

One of the many challenges people face when they are released from prison is breaking the conditioning. Obviously, you can't bust someone in the mouth when they cut in front of you in line at a restaurant or you'll end up in jail. In prison, if you allow such blatant disrespect to go unchecked you invite a plethora of problems. Sadly, there were times when my father forgot where he was while he was free.

Marcy's House – Aransas Pass

Late Summer of 1988

My cousin Marcy, Aunt Lema's third daughter, was in her early 20's in 1988 when we moved in with her. She lived with her husband, Donnie Clifton, and their four children – Jerry, Tommy, Tabitha, and Don Don – in a cozy 3 bedroom house behind the post office in Aransas Pass. A free spirit with an affable and outgoing personality, Marcy made a living working as a waitress. Unlike her brother Junior, Marcy's kids were well-mannered and disciplined and their house stayed clean and comfortable as a result. She said we could stay with her as long as we needed to get back on our feet.

It was still summertime, and I spent my days outside hanging out with Jerry and Tommy, one and two years younger than me, respectively. Their hair was bright blond like mine, and we shared similar body builds, so people often thought we were brothers. We always got along great. They thought of me as their older, much cooler, cousin Robert. In contrast to Billy Wayne and Troy, they tried to imitate me rather than defeat me.

They took me down to an office building with a brand new concrete parking lot, perfect for riding their skateboards. None of us knew how to skate, but we had a blast racing each other, jumping a ramp we made, and pushing each other while one of us laid on the skateboard, arms and legs outstretched like Superman.

Frank and Raymond Tejarina skated into the parking lot. They had long black hair, wore metal T-Shirts and cut-off shorts. Apparently my cousins knew them and were intimidated by them because they got quiet when they showed up. Frank skated around us, talking trash, flaunting his skills. He skidded to a halt directly in front of me, whipped his hair around, and popped his skateboard in his hand in one motion. He was a stocky kid, by far the biggest of all of us, and he stuck his chest out confidently with a smile. "I'm the king of this motherfucker, Esse! Who the fuck are you?" "That's our cousin Robert." Jerry said with pride. "He'll kick your ass, Frank!"

"There's a new king in town." I said matter-of-factly.

Frank seemed amused. He grabbed me by the shirt and slung me to the ground, laughing. I got back up and charged him, sending both of us tumbling to the ground. He was bigger and stronger, but I was quicker and just as mean. Still, he pinned me and slapped his hand on the ground. "One, two, THREE!" He jumped up pumping his fists in the air. "Naw, I'm still da king!"

It follows that Frank and Raymond became my best friends. They were both born on September 2nd, but Frank was one year older. For over a year I got away with lying to them that I was born in '78 with Frank. I lied because Raymond was much smaller than me and I didn't want to be his age. I beat Raymond at almost everything; the real competition was between Frank and me. On my 10th birthday my mom told them how old I really was and Raymond was ecstatic. "You mean I'm really 16 days older than you?! Fuckin' A!"

Sea Weed

Shortly after we met, Frank and Raymond showed me around Aransas Pass. We walked along the pier where all of the shrimp boats were docked. One of the things I liked about them - besides their toughness - was that they were every bit as wild and daring as

me. We snuck onto unoccupied boats and played around until we noticed someone boarding, then we'd jump back onto the pier. We didn't want to get stuck out at sea!

In the cabin of one boat we found a large Ziploc bag filled with marijuana. Without a word I stuffed it into my shorts, pulled my shirt down, and we slipped off the boat. We quickly left the docks and found an alley to discuss things. "Do you guys know what this stuff is?" I asked. "Yeah." They said, faces not betraying their thoughts. "Fuckin' pot," Raymond said. "Fuckin' pot," I echoed. "What should we do?" "Um, I don't know? What do you think?" Frank asked. Raymond stared at his shoes. "Let's take it to the police station, let them know where we've found it. But we can't say it was on a boat or they'll know we were sneaking around. We can say we found it on one of the tables NEXT to the boat," I offered. Internally, I was torn. I wanted to keep it, take it home to my family. I just didn't know where these kids stood; and I didn't want them knowing I got high.

They agreed with what I said, and we walked to the police station. Once inside I handed the bag over to a cop behind a desk. I relayed our fabricated story to her as she listened intently. She simply thanked us and sent us on our way, told us to be careful and have a nice day.

We left the station. Nobody spoke for several blocks, everyone lost in their own thoughts. Finally, I said, "Man, we should've tried some of it." "Shit, I was thinking the same thing!" Frank looked disgusted. "Yeah!" Raymond chimed. "Man, why didn't you fuckin' say something then?!" I demanded. They looked at each other. "We thought you were against it or something," Frank said. "Hell no! I thought y'all were! I smoke pot!"

They said they've been getting high with their uncle. I said my parents are cool; they let me smoke with them. We all felt stupid for turning the pot over to the cops. I took them to Marcy's house and pinched her stash, and rolled us a couple of joints, and we got high in her backyard, laughing at ourselves. Over the years the story became infamous when we told people how we met.

Lamont Street-Aransas Pass

Fall Of 1988

My father and brother went to work with Donnie on a shrimp boat after we moved in with him and Marcy. They were in the Gulf for 30 days and returned with over a thousand bucks combined. Steven got seasick, though, and neither liked the idea of being out at sea for 30 day stretch. So, my dad scoured the town looking for another job. He landed one as a maintenance worker for the Government Housing Projects in Aransas Pass, and soon got my brother a job there too. Things were looking up for us for a change.

We moved into a 2 bedroom brick house on Lamont St., a couple of miles from Marcy's house. We were able to get an old Ford truck and rent furniture and a home TV/entertainment center. The place didn't have central A/C and heating, but we had two A/C window units and several box fans – total improvement from the conditions on FM 1069.

My dad put up a basketball goal in our driveway and played hoops with me most days after work. The front yard was large enough for football games, which became customary on weekends when Junior brought his family over. The men would watch the games on TV – they were Dallas Cowboys fans, we pulled for the Houston Oilers- while the woman cooked and gossiped in the kitchen. After the games the fellas took it to the yard to play football. Junior played quarterback for team McLain, my dad was the field general for team Pruett. Frank and Raymond, whose father lived in another town, often joined us with Jerry and Tommy to balance the teams out.

On Sundays when no one showed up I watched the Oilers play with my dad and Steven on our living room couch. Football wasn't that big of a deal to me way back then. I loved playing it, but watching it seemed boring. The quality time spent with my father and brother was nice, though.

I got the job selling newspapers with Frank and Raymond early that Fall. We were paid a commission so it became a competition, as everything was, to see who could sell the most. Location was the key. The post office was by far the best spot to set up shop, but they only allowed two kids at a time to sell newspapers there. Johnny Joe Otero, a teenager, was assured a spot there every weekend because he could kick all our asses. (Rumor has it Johnny Joe could save the princess on the Super Mario Brothers arcade, although I never saw him do it.) Frank, Raymond and I would alternate each weekend on who'd work with Johnny Joe. The others would hit the H.E.B. supermarket, another good place to sell newspapers.

My newspaper selling days were short-lived. On several occasions I talked Frank and Raymond into spending all of our money, including the company's. Our boss let us slide the first couple of times that we showed up with bullshit stories of being beaten up and robbed by older boys, or losing the bag we kept our money. Once, we even told him we dropped our bag when a dog chased us and couldn't find it later. We took his kindness for weakness one too many times and he fired us.

Five Finger Discount

When we sold Newspapers we always had money for arcade games and snacks. There used to be a chain of convenience stores in south Texas called The Icebox. Aransas Pass had two of them – one on either side of town – in addition to about seven other stores. I

loved going to The Icebox to play Super Mario Brothers and eat their fried burritos covered with melted cheese! After we were fired, though, money was scarce for such things.

One weekend we were at my house getting stoned, watching television, when I was overcome with a bad case of the munchies. My refrigerator didn't satisfy my cravings; it must've been a few days before payday because there wasn't much to munch on. I asked my friends if they had any money? They didn't. Raymond had an idea. "There's always 'five finger discount!'" I'd never heard the phrase. Frank explained by wiggling his fingers and said, "Pay with your fingers, man!"

We walked to The Icebox. Raymond told us to distract the clerk behind the counter. We asked him stupid questions while Raymond disappeared down an aisle. Moments later he rejoined us and asked a few questions of his own. Raymond acted disappointed about them not having a specific candy bar and walked out the door. We followed him down the street and he passed out candy bars. "See? Five finger discount!"

For months we walked from one end of Aransas Pass to the other, stealing from stores. We pigged out on candy bars, snack cakes, and chips, and washed it down with sodas. By late Fall it was cold enough outside to wear jackets, which we loaded the sleeves down with our plunder. The game plan was invariably the same: When a store was devoid of customers two of us distracted the clerk while the other stole. If the store had customers, we all spread out. We ate our fill and brought the rest to my house for later.

My parents never wondered where I got the junk food from. They thought I still worked for the newspaper. You see, being fired didn't deter us. We knew they kept pallets of freshly pressed newspapers by the back door of their building every morning. Most weekends – when school was out – we snuck up and stole as many newspapers as we could carry off while no one was looking. My dad often saw me at various places selling newspapers long after I'd been cut.

Early one morning my dad woke me up to get ready for work at the job I no longer held. He dropped me off at a corner where Frank and Raymond were and gave me 10 dollars in food stamps for lunch. My friends and I went to the nearest store and played their arcades. I bought us all something to eat and drink.

Frank and I were in the middle of a game when Raymond alerted us to a new rack of porno magazines! The three of us left the arcades to check them out. There was a crowd of people in the store so we felt safe looking at the covers under the plastic. We each found one we liked and stuffed our pants with it.

The store was ran by a father and son combo. The old man rang up customers as we headed for the exit. Frank led the way, Raymond and I right behind him. Just as I crossed the threshold of the door the son, a dark-haired man in his twenties, burst from behind the counter and shouted, "Stop those kids!"

Frank and Raymond broke off running. I stumbled and fell. I tried to regain my footing and that enabled the store owner to catch me. He snatched me up by the shirt and pulled me back into the store. I kicked and screamed, trying to get away, but he had me. He twisted me around and lifted my shirt, removed the magazine, and handed it to his father. He told his father, "I'm sick and tired of these punk kids stealing from us. His friends got away. I'm calling the cops." I began to cry and beg him not to call the police. I sobbed and wheezed, snot running down my face. I was terrified at the thought of being arrested. "Please don't call the cops! I won't ever do it again, I promise!" For a moment I thought I was reaching the old man. He told his son to put the phone down. He spoke sternly to me, tried to drive home the importance of working for what you wanted in life as opposed to stealing it. I agreed with everything he said, hoping, he'd just let me go. Finally, he told his son that he thought I learned my lesson and to let me go home. The son was irate. "Pop, if we let this little fucker go he will do it again. The only way he's gonna learn anything is if the cops get ahold of his ass. Please, let me do this my way this time. "I'm sorry, son". The father said to me before walking away to tend to his customers.

A cop car showed up and the cop spoke with the angry son. I was placed in the backseat of the car. The officer lectured me from the front seat without looking at me. He asked me who the other kids were, the ones that got away. I told him I'd just met them, didn't know their names. I'm not sure he believed me but he didn't press the matter. He asked me where I lived. I was shocked that he drove me home.

My father was in the driveway when we arrived. The cop stepped out of his car, shut the door, shook my father's hand. As they conversed my dad's eyes kept cutting at me. I knew I was in deep shit.

The cop let me out of the car and warned me to stop stealing. My father ordered me inside our house while he saw the cop off. I waited in trepidation. I was trembling when my father opened the door, and I cringed when he bit down on his tongue and bottom lip. He slapped me on the side of the head and I fell back onto the couch. He shook me violently by the shirt. "What the hell is wrong with you, boy? Stealing from stores? The police brining you home? You trying to get me thrown in jail and you taken from us like Tammie was?" "No, sir." I cried "Well, that's just what'll happen, you keep this shit up. I work hard to take care of you. You need something or want something, ask me. I ain't got it, you save your money up. But no more stealing, okay? You scared me half to death when I saw that cop pull up with you in the backseat." "Yes, sir." He calmed down and hugged me, told me he was sorry for hitting me and that he loved me. I was determined not to steal again. In fact, I never stole from another store in Aransas Pass after that day. I was tempted many times, but the fear of being caught kept me from it. I still hadn't learned the lesson that taking from others isn't right.

Kieburger Elementary School

Aransas Pass' population is probably 85% Hispanic, which was reflected in their school system. I attended Kieburger Elementary for all of the 3rd and 4th grades. When we first arrived in south Texas I went to another elementary school in Aransas Pass (I think it was simply called Aransas Pass Elementary) for the 2nd grade, then I finished that grade at Rockport elementary. At Kieburger I was one of about twenty white kids, and there was only one black kid. Despite all of that I got along well with my schoolmates.

The only teacher I remember by name is Ms. Driscoll. She was an older lady with thick, long silver hair that she kept braided into a ponytail. She was super nice and had remarkable patience, which I tested regularly. Once, we were doing an art project. I kept ripping my paper up in frustration because I didn't like how it was turning out. She sat beside me, wrapped her arm around my shoulder, grabbed my hand with hers and guided me through it. She said it didn't have to be perfect, it was effort she was looking for. She wanted us to do our best in everything we did. I made A's and B's in every subject, but art intimidated me. I never had the patience for it. Ms. Driscoll wouldn't let me quit, though. After she showed me what she was looking for I tried again on my own. Again I was disgusted with the result, but she applauded my effort and encouraged me to practice.

All the students loved Ms. Driscoll, especially when she brought treats to class! During my 3rd grade year Sheriff Linda Thompson gave a speech to our class. She was tall, blonde and gorgeous. All the boys were on their best behavior, captivated by her. Several police officers showed us a suitcase with a variety of drugs protected under a sheet of glass. Labels identified each drug. The purpose was to show us the drugs so we'd know what they looked like and what to avoid. There were many colored pills, powders, herbs and syringes. Most of the stuff I hadn't seen before.

Sheriff Thompson spoke about the dangers of drugs and gave us advice about how to act if offered any by strangers. "Run and tell someone!" She related her experiences with addicts who were either in prison or a slave to drugs, and she cautioned us about the company we keep. The one thing that she said that still reverberates through my head to this day: "Over half of you," She pointed at the entire class. "Will end up in prison one day. I'm not trying to scare you, just stating the statistical facts. Keep that in mind and try to stay in the half that remains free. Doing drugs will likely lead you to prison."

At Kieburger everything was a competition. Academics came easy to me (when I wasn't high). There were only a few of my classmates that consistently matched my grades. I remember Mandy, a cute Jewish girl with long black hair, being the best writer. She ate my dust in Math. Maria and Jose joined Mandy and I as the brightest in the class. It became a game for us to see who'd not only score the highest grade on papers but finish first... I didn't have any peers in the cafeteria – I cleaned my try first every time and eyed the other kids' lunches!

The real challenges were on the playground and in gym class. Our coach was an old guy, skinny, with thick glasses and a nasally voice. He timed us doing exercises, counted how many we could do each in 60 seconds, and graded us accordingly. Frank and Ramon were my biggest competition doing squats, push-ups and sit-ups. No one could touch me on the pull-up bar. Most days I could bust 20 plus straight without breaking a sweat. There wasn't a single kid in school who could do more than 15 straight other than me. Coach once told a visiting Junior High coach, "There isn't a boy over there (in the Junior High) that can do as many pull-ups in a row as Robert Pruett!" Such accolades inspired me.

I couldn't kick a kickball as far as Frank (no one could), but I could place the ball where I wanted it, and ran the bases well, so I was usually a top three pick to play. Ramon had all the moves in soccer, and Brandon could shoot a basketball lights out, but I was the fastest kid in school. At recess we all wrestled behind the gym where the teachers wouldn't catch us. Frank was the undisputed "toughest kid in school", but he was challenged by the likes of Roman, Jeremy and me. Raymond was fighter, too, but he was just so small and he didn't win many matches.

All through elementary school I excelled in class, participated in most extracurricular activities, but I was the biggest loser in conduct. I liked making people laugh, I was a smartass, and was labeled a class clown by the teachers. My grade for behavior was usually a U, for unsatisfactory.

U Street House – Aransas Pass

Winter – Summer of 1989

In the winter of 1989 we moved into a blue 3 bedroom/2bath house with a 2 car garage. My father and brother had both received pay raises at the projects, enabling us to move into a better neighborhood. The house was situated at the top of the bend adjoining two streets in the best neighborhood I ever lived in. We had a huge fenced in backyard where we kept Dynamite. Steven and I had separate bedrooms, although I often fell asleep on the couch watching movies and playing games. In the nine years that my father was free this was our most secure time, financially. Mom got new furniture, we had cable TV and a phone line installed, the pantries stayed stocked with groceries, and dad bought me the new Sega Genesis! Life was great.

The neighborhood was quiet. Most of the residents on our street were older, including Ms. Driscoll and her husband. The only kids around were high-schoolers, none of which wanted to hang out with a nine year old, no matter how cool I was! Frank and Raymond had moved, and all my cousins lived on the other side of town, so there wasn't anyone to

hang out with. My cousins did ask to spend the night a lot so they could play Sega with me. For the most part I stuck to myself, rode my bike through the neighborhood, watched cable TV or played Sega, or I played in the backyard with Dynamite.

My mother divorced my father while he was still in the Missouri State Penitentiary. She'd grown jaded after years of raising his children, alone, while he went to prison. Of course she never stopped loving him, and, more practically, needed his help so she always took him back when he was released. They talked a lot of remarrying in the years after he was released in 1986, but they either didn't have the money or the timing wasn't right for one reason or another. That is until the spring of 1989 when they announced they were getting married.... again!

They decided to remarry on April 18, 1989, my niece Samantha's first birthday. The wedding took place at our house off the U, in the living room. The place was jam-packed all day and smelled of food, alcohol, and pot. All of the family in south Texas showed, even the ones we were feuding with, and they brought all their friends. Roughly 70% of those attending I'd never met before.

My mother wore a beautiful white dress, my father had on his best button-down, long sleeve shirt and blue jeans. I stood by the couch next to my brother as our parents exchanged their vows, then kissed. Once the applause died down my mother, tears in her eyes, told the room, "The second time is the charm – I'll never divorce him again!" Everyone burst with laughter.

A stage was set-up in the garage with guitars, amplifiers, drums, a bass, and microphones. The driveway and street were crowded. My father, Uncle Wayne, and their musician buddies performed for hours after the ceremony. I sat on a chair just inside the garage, stoned, drinking beer. The ambience was warm and friendly, with lots of conversation and laughter between songs. My head started spinning the more I drank, so I went inside and lay on the couch. I remember thinking that life doesn't get better than this before passing out.

You've Got My Seat

Though I've never stepped foot in the Beacon 44 I know the place's set-up from all the stories I've heard: A long bar with stools on one side of the room, a small stage on the other and table in between. When we lived on the U street my father spent a lot of time there on the weekends, singing for free beer.

Danny Wildman was a good friend of the family. He was close to my brother's age, had curly brown hair, and sounded like a frog. He was as widely known for the four-finger quarter sacks of pot he sold as the beat-up Volkswagen "slug bug" car he drove. One weekend he burst through our front door. "Sam's pissed!"

My father staggered in behind him. My brother and I were on the couch. Danny Wildman continued as my dad receded down the hallway to his bedroom. "This fat Mexican disrespected Sam. He won't listen to me. Talk to him, Steven."

Danny Wildman nervously reconstructed what happened at the Beacon 44: our dad was singing on stage as Danny Wildman flirted with a barfly. After his set was over our dad went to his table, where he had his cigarettes and beer, and tapped the obese Mexican on the shoulder. "Excuse me, mister. You've got my seat." The Mexican was in the middle of a conversation and brushed my father off. "Fuck-off, old man. Find another seat."

My father casually gathered his stuff from the table after he realized he didn't have his Buck knife. He drained his beer and found Danny Wildman, who drove him to the bar, and ran it down to him. He then told Danny Wildman to take him home, he needed his knife. On the ride to our place he tried to calm my dad down, to no avail.

Danny Wildman tried again when my father emerged from the hallway. My father can be obstinate, and on that day he was unrelenting. He was going back to the Beacon 44, end of discussion. Danny Wildman acquiesced and drove my dad and Steven back to the bar.

The big Mexican was loitering around the entrance when they arrived. Steven approached him first. "You got a fuckin' problem with my dad?" The man knocked my brother to the ground. In the next instant my father was on him, stabbing him repeatedly, causing him to double over in agony. Steven and Danny Wildman pulled my father off the guy and the three of them fled in Danny Wildman's slug bug. Once again we had to move abruptly. Danny Wildman drove my father and me to Ingleside, a town over, to my cousin Marcy's apartments. Mom and Steven stayed behind to pack. I never stepped foot in the house off the U again.

At Marcy's place my father recounted what happened for her, Aunt Lema and Uncle Ricky. Dad thought it would be best to leave Aransas Pass, get as far away as possible. Houston seemed like a logical destination. He left word for my mother and Steven to get as much of our stuff as possible to Marcy's and hang right there until he sent for them. Uncle Ricky drove my father and I to Houston that night.

We rode in a heavy rainstorm. Houston was under a flood warning, and we got stuck in the middle of traffic. In minutes the car was submerged and we had to abandon it. We walked to Ramada Inn, high atop a hill, where we rented a room for the night. We were soaked and tired. Uncle Ricky lamented the loss of his car.

The next day we somehow made it to James Terry's house in Cloverleaf. I smoked a lot of pot the next couple of days while my dad and Ricky worked with James Terry cutting trees. Then Aunt Lema called with good news: the police were not looking for my dad. Miraculously, he wasn't identified in the stabbing. Or perhaps the Mexican just kept his mouth shut? Snitches tend to disappear in south Texas. Regardless, the three of us decided to hitchhike back to Ingleside.

We walked more with Uncle Ricky tagging along. I guess people are reluctant to pick up two grown men, kid with them or not. We got rides, though, and made it about twenty miles from Ingleside before the last one dropped us off.

Even if we didn't get another ride we thought we were home free. That is until a cop pulled over in front of us. He seemed nice, understanding even, and told us to hop in, he'd take us the rest of the way. Everything seemed cool, except that the cop ran my dad and Ricky's names. Ricky had warrants for his arrest, but my father was clear. The cop dropped us off at Marcy's and took Ricky to Jail. We had to break the bad news to Aunt Lema.

Avenue A Property – Aransas Pass

Summer of 1989

After Junior was released from prison Uncle Wayne moved him and his family to Avenue A, another place out in the sticks. There were three trailer homes and a large storage building on about two acres of land. The largest trailer was home to Uncle Wayne and Junior's bunch. Mike and Tammie lived in a mini trailer on the side with Samantha, their one year old. The other trailer was owned by a mysterious friend of Uncle Wayne's, someone I don't recall ever seeing.

Once again we'd fallen on hard times. My father and brother lost their jobs at the Projects for missing work in the aftermath of the stabbing. Marcy already had a full house and feared eviction if she took us in, so we joined Uncle Wayne's family.

It was never pleasant living with Junior's family. Particularly when we stayed with them. If they lived with us my mom put her foot down and forced Junior's kids to pick up after themselves, to help clean house. She couldn't stand a dirty house. But when we lived with them, Junior's kids ran amuck and were very defiant to my mother. "You're not the boss of us, Aunt Marcia! This is our house!" Junior was too lazy to get off the couch and keep his kids in line. Bonnie worked all day, and, consequently, their place suffered. All the kids wet the bed. Billy Wayne couldn't hold his mud. There were piles of dirty clothes in every room, broken toys and games strewn everywhere. Their pets weren't house-trained. Box fans only circulated the stench in the hot and humid south Texas heat.

The day we moved in, Tonya, the eldest of the two girls, wanted to show me something. I followed her into the kitchen and she pointed to a cabinet above the sink. She wanted me to open it for her, I thought. Maybe she just couldn't reach it, was too scared to climb the counter. I crawled up there and opened it. Hundreds, if not thousands, of cockroaches poured onto me! I flew off the counter screaming, dusting them off of me. Tonya laughed at me and ran away!

I got to sleep in Mike and Tammie's trailer some nights. Since Samantha was a toddler Uncle Wayne made sure they had an A/C window unit, which kept their place nice and cool. All of us kids tried to sneak in there to cool off throughout the sweltering summer days, but my sister rarely let Junior's kids inside. "They stank," she said. Me being her brother, and quite hygienic I might add, she didn't mind me being inside. She'd beat my cousins away with a broom!

Boys Will Be Boys

The property on Avenue A was cut into a thicket, and, like our old place on FM 1069, it awakened my love for the outdoors. My cousins had a thick rope (taken from a tug boat) tied to the limb of a giant oak tree in their yard. We'd climb the tree and stand on the branches, perhaps twenty feet off the ground, while someone below tossed you the rope. The branches were long and strong enough to run along them and swing off the tree. We were reckless kids, though, always trying to hurt each other. The one on the ground either had a stick or clump of dirt waiting on you as you swung past, hoping to knock you off! The object was to ride your momentum around them, and when you neared them use your legs to incapacitate them! On the return swing, if you made it that far, you not only had to avoid the ground person but those still in the tree waiting for their turn. They'd have switches ready for you! It was more fun than it probably sounds!

As boys will do, I fought Billy Wayne and Troy all the time. Sometimes over a game or stupid argument, sometimes for sport. Billy Wayne was the biggest of the three, but he was fat. Troy and I were long and lean and usually came out on top against him... unless he managed to get on top of us first! One time, I knocked Billy Wayne down, pinned his arms with my knees and squeezed his cheeks together tightly as I yelled at him. His mom, Bonnie, yanked me off of him and screamed at me. "Why are you being a bully?" "He started it!" I protested. "When he gets older he'll be twice your size and beat your little ass!" "Yeah?" I was still hot about whatever he did to me. "I better get mine in now then, huh?" Billy Wayne was on all fours, trying to get back up. I ran and kicked him in the side, sent him back down wailing, then ran off laughing.

Another time I chased Troy for eating my candy bar. He was a fast little fucker, but didn't have my speed. He did have a lead on me and ran full speed, but I was gaining on him. There was a metal cable attached to two trees that our mothers used as a clothesline. No clothes were on it. I thought he'd seen it, but as he neared it he turned his head to check his lead, smiled at his advantage, and clotheslined himself in the neck! He flew feet first through the air and landed hard on his back about 10 feet away. He was in great pain, held his throat and cried, and I knelt beside him. He thought I was still out to get him and turned away. I told him it was cool, tried to calm him down, asked him if he was

okay? He found his breath and let me know he was okay. I joked with him about his flight, his misfortune, and we laughed together. Our mothers watched from a back window and said we were a couple of idiots.

Lost

Down the road on Avenue A was a pasture with about 20 head of cattle. We liked playing there, messing with them. I was down there one morning with Billy Wayne, Troy and Tonya and their dog. I wanted to explore the woods behind the pasture and, naturally, the boys and their dog followed. The going was difficult because the brush was dense, the land arid, and soon Billy Wayne retreated. He was just too big to go any further. Troy and I made it to a clearing with power lines, the dog right with us. I wanted to keep going, see what we could find, but Troy wanted to go home and did. The dog shared my sense of adventure and stuck with me.

To me it was a journey through the wilderness; I was exploring uncharted territory, searching for hidden treasures. I thought I might find a hidden cave, a magical river or lake. The possibilities were endless as I strove forward, dog by my side.

Unfortunately, all I found was thicker brush the deeper I went. The trees were dead and dry, the ground cracked and hard. An hour into my journey I gave up and tried to retrace my path back to the pasture.

It was incredibly hot and humid. I sweated profusely trekking through the dense dry wood. For awhile I thought I was making progress until I came to a clearing that I'd previously passed. I'd gone in a circle, lost my sense of direction. I was growing tired and confused. I admitted to myself that I was lost.

After several more hours of moving slowly through the woods I got caught in some branches. I panicked and ripped wildly at the limbs that pierced me, crawled furiously under seemingly impenetrable growth, and finally collapsed to the ground in tears. I dug my fingers into the hard ground until they bled. I cursed myself for being so stupid as to get lost. The dog was still with me and licked my face. For some reason that only angered me and I hit him, told him to go home and save himself. He whined and jumped back. Immediately I felt like crap and called him back to me. He came and I petted him, hugged him, said I was sorry. I talked to him, asked him what to do? He didn't know. He was following my stupid ass. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and told the dog to come on, we have to keep moving or die.

I was lost for about 10 hours. The sky darkened and I was convinced I would die. Suddenly, I stumbled upon a dirt road! Rejuvenated, I ran in one direction until the road ended at another familiar road. Once again, I cried, this time out of joy and relief, and I walked home. Id' been on the move all day, but I'd only travelled about five miles.

I was exhausted and dirty when I walked through the front door. My mom was mad at me, demanded to know where I'd been? She said my father and Junior were out in the car looking for me. She calmed down when I told her what happened. She begged me not to go out in the woods alone again. Trust me, lesson learned.

For Better or Worse

I noticed an increasing tension between my parents at Uncle Wayne's place. One night while everyone ate, my dad showed up drunk. I heard him yelling at my mother in the middle bedroom, then they carried it outside. Steven and I sat our plates down and followed.

Our parents were in a heated exchange by the car. It sounded like money was the culprit. My father and Steven had yet to find jobs and it was wearing on our father. He shouted at our mother and, suddenly, shoved her against the car and put the finger in her face.

My brother was on him in a flash, slamming his fist into his head, driving him to the ground. "You wanna hit my momma, motherfucker? Hit me!" My mother begged them to stop as they rolled over the ground. Steven pinned my father down and said, "I know shit's bad, man. Ain't no reason to take it out on mom. If you ever hit her again I'll kill you." My father had calmed down, as did Steven. My brother helped him up and my dad wrapped his arms around my brother, told him he has right for standing up for his mother, that he loved him and was proud of him. Dad then embraced our mother, told her he was sorry. That was the only time I ever remember my father hitting my mother.

Lazy Acres Trailer Park – Aransas Pass

Fall of 1989 – Summer of 1990

My dad and Steven got jobs with Donnie Clifton again, this time with an offshore oil drilling company. By the time school started in the Fall of 1989 we were able to move into the Lazy Acres trailer park in Aransas Pass. It was a rather nice trailer park, with smooth asphalt roads connecting the lots. Huge oaks and weeping willows offered plenty of shade. Our trailer was a 2 bedroom/2 bath with two A/C window units, thankfully! Living in south Texas made be abhor the heat. Most of all, when we moved into Lazy Acres, I was happy to be away from the funk that clung to my cousins.

By this time the majority of our family in south Texas were living in the Lazy Acres. Aunt Lema shared a trailer with her youngest daughter, Carrol, and her boyfriend, Gary,

along with their two kids, Savannah and Crystal. Marcy lived next door to them, and her long-time friend, Dianne, who was like family, lived in a trailer over with her family. Chris, Lema's eldest, had just moved back to Texas from Florida with her husband Mike, and kids, Chucky and Angela. They also lived in the trailer park.

I first met Chris and her family several years before, in Houston, when they lived in the neighborhood with Grandma Johnson. Every time we visited Grandma Johnson, Dad took us over to Chris' house where I'd hang out with Chucky. He was about seven years older than me, but we got along great and I thought he was really cool. At the Lazy Acres I noticed that he'd grown physically, yet he still had childish ways. His mother's a hypochondriac and has put her kids through hell, imagining all sorts of illnesses and psychological problems you could have. Before Chucky was 15 he'd already been in two separate mental institutions.

Regardless, I was stoked to see Chucky at the Lazy Acres. He showed me to his room where we played Mike Tyson's Punch-out on his Nintendo. I was so enraptured by the game that he'd leave me alone for several hours and come back to find me still wide-eyed and glued to the screen. If I could've gotten away with it I'd have stayed there all night, every night, but Chris made me go home before she went to bed.

Chucky hated that I could smoke pot in front of my parents, yet he wasn't even allowed to smoke cigarettes in front of his. My dad didn't mind if he smoked with us, though, so he spent a lot of time at our trailer.

I hung out with Chucky a lot those first few weeks, but he was mentally imbalanced and started to grate my nerves. He was neurotic and very immature. There was a beautiful girl his age that was friends with Marcy. She had a crush on Chucky, followed him around like a puppy dog. One day we were all at Aunt Lema's place, watching a movie. She had a big screen TV and VCR and loved watching movies. Chucky and his girlfriend found a room and had sex. He then bragged to everyone how easy she was to bed, like a real jerk. The girl was a virgin and Chucky's behavior crushed her. I found her outside crying, trying to cut herself with a Coke can. I took the can from her and tried to console her. She was such a pretty girl, and I secretly had a crush on her. I told her Chucky was an asshole, not to pay attention to him. She said I was sweet, but she stayed with Chucky. I stopped hanging out with him so much.

Joe Cool

Once again, there weren't many kids my age to hang out with at Lazy Acres. I had Jerry and Tommy for about a month after we moved in, then Marcy moved them to the opposite side of town. As I searched the trailer park for things to do one day I ran into a group of teenagers with skateboards. They were practicing tricks and maneuvers, and

one dude in particular had an impressive repertoire. He had short brown hair and they called him Joe. At a distance I watched kid after kid attempt to ollie over a rail and wipe out, but Joe cleared it with ease. When I rode skateboards with Frank and Raymond or my cousins it was all about racing, jumping ramps. We had no real skills. These teenagers were good, though, and my interest in skateboarding grew exponentially watching them.

When all of the teenagers split up only Joe remained. He hopped on his board and headed my way. He slid to a stop by me and struck up a conversation. His name was Joe Poore, he was 15 years old and lived with his grandparents at the Lazy Acres. He said he'd been skating for years. He lit a cigarette and asked me if I skated. I told him I did, but didn't have a board and didn't know any tricks. He did an ollie (made the skateboard jump while on it), rolled his board to me and told me to try it. It was awkward at first, I couldn't get the 'board off the ground' and I busted my ass several times, to Joe's amusement. He was cool, though. He demonstrated for me several times and showed me where to place my feet, how to become one with the skateboard, until I got it down.

Joe went home to check with his grandparents and I ran off hoping to catch up with him again. Later that afternoon I found him and my cousin Chucky in front of Joe's trailer. They were smoking cigarettes, listening to heavy metal on a portable radio. At the time I was just getting into heavy metal. My cousin John was a metalhead; his place was decorated with posters of Iron Maiden, Ozzy, Led Zeppelin, and other bands, and he could play a lot of songs on guitar. I loved watching him play, and he showed me how to do a few songs. Joe seemed to know a lot about rock music. He grew animated telling us about the concerts he'd seen in Corpus Christi. As with skateboarding, Joe helped ignite my interest in rock music.

I don't remember what it was behind or how it started, but Chucky and I began fighting. He grabbed me by the throat and held me against Joe's trailer. I couldn't breathe. I kicked at him and tried to shake free. He just laughed. Joe got in Chucky's face, pushed him off me, told him to pick on someone his own size. Chucky had the craziest look on his face as he laughed maniacally and walked off. I knew way back then that he wasn't playing with a full deck.

In spite of our age difference Joe became my best friend. As I grew older I didn't hang out with many kids my age; I often ran with an older crowd, and it started with Joe and his friends. I went to high school football games with them, became obsessed riding skateboards in one kid's backyard on a half-pipe with him and Joe, and smoked pot with them. They thought I was cool because I could roll a joint better than any of them! But Joe also liked playing video games. He had a Nintendo of his own and we spent a lot of time in his room playing.

I'd never smoked a cigarette until I met Joe. I took hits off of them before, and each time choked and thought they were nasty. With Joe, I smoked until I turned green and got sick, then I smoked some more. His grandpa worked on a boat and had cases of

cigarettes stored in their trailer, so we had plenty of smokes. My parents were cool with him smoking pot at my place, but we never got high at Joe's unless his grandparents were gone. Conversely, I couldn't smoke a cigarette in front of my dad until I was 12. My mom never cared what I smoked.

I Learned it Watching You

My mom used to drive me to school when we lived at the Lazy Acres. On the ride there we sometimes smoked a joint. Before I got out of the car she would spray me with air freshener and warn me to 'maintain', meaning don't telegraph to my teacher that I was high. I was adept at acting 'normal' when I was high around grown-ups who weren't. I learned to straighten my face, control my laughter, and speak coherently when I needed to. The problem was I couldn't stay focused very long and spaced out in class. My teachers often had to repeat a question for me. I got behind on my work when I went to school high and had to catch up on it on days when I wasn't stoned.

Mom dropped me off at school one morning and I found Ramon in the sandbox. I'd promised to get him high that morning. He was anxious when he saw me. "Did you bring it?" "Does Howdy Dudey got wooden balls? Fucking' A I brought it!" His face lit up and we made our way into one of the concrete cylinders in the sandbox. Zippo lighters were in style when I was in the 4th grade and I pulled mine out with the joint I pinched out of my mom's stash. She had no idea I'd brought weed to school. Ramon and I smoked half of the joint together and I let him keep the rest. The bell rang and we parted ways to different classes.

By the time I made it to class I was dazed and confused. It was excellent pot. I found my desk and sat there trying to regain my composure. Suddenly I snapped. I had to turn my homework in! It was a rule that we were to turn the previous night's homework in at the teacher's desk as soon as we entered class. I hurriedly reached into my backpack and walked to her desk.

Before I realized what I was doing I dropped my Zippo lighter on my teacher's desk. I immediately caught my mistake and tried to improvise. "Um, I found that on the playground. I didn't want some 3rd grader finding it and lighting the school on fire." She looked down at the Zippo lighter and then back up at me. "Thank you... Where's your homework?" "Oh! I forgot! It's in my backpack." I retrieved my homework and handed it to her. I told her I was in such a hurry to give her the lighter that I forgot to use the restroom before class and asked her for permission to go, which she granted.

I was shaking when I got into the hallway. I felt like a fool, giving my teacher my Zippo! I needed to get my act together and I hoped washing my face would help.

Ramon was in the restroom, freaking out. He said some kid saw us smoking and threatened to snitch on us so he was getting rid of the evidence. He had his own lighter and lit the other half of the joint. We smoked it together before washing our faces.

As soon as we entered the hallway Mr. Ferguson, the principal, was walking our way. He called us to him. Again I was trembling as he asked us if we'd been smoking. "No, sir." We said. "You smell like marijuana and your eyes are red. Follow me." He led us to a bench outside his office and instructed us to wait there while he called our parents. I told Ramon to deny everything, that they didn't have anything on us, and he agreed. I was worried Mr. Ferguson would call the cops, that the Children's Protective Services would take me away. I was concerned about my parents going to jail. No way would I admit to getting high.

Ramon's mom arrived. She spoke with Mr. Ferguson briefly and then called Ramon to join them. I couldn't hear everything, but Ramon started to cry and I just knew he was caving on me. Finally, Ramon and his mother left the building.

Mr. Ferguson couldn't get a hold of my parents. He had to drive me home. I rode in the backseat. He said he was shocked boys our age were doing drugs. He made a few comments about how bad drugs were, but most of the ride he spent in silence.

My mother opened our front door before Mr. Ferguson could knock. She was the only one home. She was surprised to see us. "Is everything ok?"

Mr. Ferguson asked if he could come inside to talk and she waved us in. The trailer reeked of a mixture of air-freshener and marijuana. Mom and I sat on the couch, Mr. Ferguson on the recliner. A tray with weed and Zig Zag rolling papers was in plain view underneath our glass coffee table. No doubt Mr. Ferguson noticed it as he explained the morning events to my mother. As he spoke my mother cut angry glances at me. She put on a show for him. "Where'd you get it from, boy? Your ass is grass and I'm gonna be the lawnmower! Wait 'til your daddy finds out!" It felt like being in a poorly acted B movie.

Surprisingly, Mr. Ferguson never alerted the authorities. He simply told my mother I was suspended for three days and implored her to be careful about leaving things around the house. My mother yelled at me after he left and threatened to tell my father. I begged her not to because I knew he would put a boot in my ass. She agreed not to tell him, and I promised I would not take weed to school ever again. It would be a couple years at least before she let me get high before school. "Let" is the key word; I snuck around and did a lot of things behind my parents' backs over the years.

Every time I reflect on this story I think of the old anti-drug commercial where the father bursts into his son's room with the marijuana he found. The father demands to know where his son got it from? Where'd he learn to do drugs? The son screams at his father, "I learned it from watching you, dad! I learned it from watching YOU!"

Times of Change

Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Our senses and limited perception sometimes deceive us into thinking that the world and everything in it is solid, stable and abiding. The steel table I'm writing this on seems solid enough, and so do the concrete walls and iron bars securing me in my cell, but it's all inexorably eroding as the particles that make everything up race at high velocities, smash together, and then cancel each other out. From as far back as the 6th century B.C.E, Siddhartha Gautama recognized that "decay is inherent in all compound matter." The Greek mystical philosopher Heraclitus (c. 540-480 B.C.E) agreed. "Everything flows, is in constant flux and movement, nothing is abiding....we cannot step into the same river twice." This is so because, when I step into a river for the second time, neither I nor the river are the same. Everything changes, and nothing stays the same. Yet we desperately cling to the forms of this world as if they're impervious to change, only to have them torn away from us, along with our hearts.

Child psychologists say that a stable environment, including lasting friendships and strong role models, is crucial to healthy development for a kid. Through the first fifteen years of my life I became quite intimate with change and instability, particularly once the 90's rolled around. Sometimes the changes were welcomed, like when my dad came home from prison or when we moved into a better place; other times it was heart-wrenching, leaving friends behind, moving in the middle of the night, being thrust into the unknown.

Right after I completed the 4th grade at Kieburger Elementary, all of the family working for the offshore oil company across the street from the Lazy Acres trailer park were laid off. By then everyone seemed sick of Aransas Pass. It was a dead-end town with limited job opportunities. Cousin Chris and her family had moved to Corpus Christi, where her husband Mike landed a good job. Marcy's family packed up and followed her lifelong friend Dianne to Vidor, a country town in East Texas. Even my best friend Joe Poore and his grandparents left town, leaving me bored and dejected.

By now, Uncle Ricky was out of jail and back with Aunt Lema. Uncle Ricky and Aunt Lema convened with my dad and came up with a plan. Using an alias, Uncle Ricky rented a U-Haul-truck, which we loaded down with our stuff, and we all headed north to look for work and a place to settle down.

It took a couple of days to pack and get everything in order. One of our last minute tasks was to return the VCR movies and video games to the rental store down the street. My dad had bought me a Nintendo the previous Christmas, but owning the games was outside of our budget back then, so I was relegated to renting them when we could afford it. My brother drove my mom and I to drop everything off and I pestered mom along the way. "C' mon, Mom! Let me rent a couple of games to take with us!" "No, Bobby Lynn!" She snapped. "We ain't comin' back. The shit's in my name and I ain't goin' to jail for no swingin' dick!" "They won't send nobody to jail over 2 games!" I reasoned. "Besides, your credit sucks, and it's under yours and Dad's names!"

We went back and forth all the way there. As usual she caved, and I got my way! I searched furiously through the shelves and selected a fighting game and "10 Yard Fight," a football game I loved playing with my dad. I knew he wouldn't give me much shit if I brought that game home, and so those were the two games that moved with us.

San Antonio, Texas-Indian Motel

Summer of 1990

With no particular destination in mind we hit the road. Uncle Ricky and my brother drove the U-Haul. Aunt Lema rode with me and my parents in our white Ford Ltd car. My sense of adventure was engaged as we left Aransas Pass behind for someplace unknown. I had many good memories in South Texas, but they were outweighed by the bad ones and I was ready for a fresh start. I daydreamed as I stared out the window, wondered where I'd go to school next fall, what my new friends would be like, what our new place would look like. Would we live in a city like Houston or another small, boring town like Aransas Pass? I was hoping for the former. I believed that whatever was in store for us would be better than what we'd left behind.

We stopped in San Antonio and rented a motel room for a couple of weeks. Uncle Ricky and Aunt Lema spoke highly of the city, saying the men would easily find jobs there, that it'd be a good place for me to go to school. I entered the office with Dad and Ricky to rent the room and we were greeted by the owners, a man and woman from India. The room was dim, strange music poured in from another room, and a pungent odor clung to the place, making me cringe. I was intrigued by the dot on the woman's forehead, but none of my family knew the significance. In the privacy of our room they joked about the "sand nigger owners." I laughed because they did, not really getting it, but not wanting to be left out.

For years Aunt Lema and Ricky passed hot checks, usually under aliases, as a hustle. Not only was the room rented with a bad check, the entire trip was illegal. Every night

Aunt Lema, Ricky and my dad went to grocery and department stores and passed hot checks. Our room stayed stocked with food, and the U-Haul was gradually loaded with soft drinks, canned goods and household appliances. Most of it was pawned off or sold to a fence Ricky knew in San Antonio. So while they said it was imperative that they find jobs, there wasn't that much pressure on them.

Aunt Lema was incredibly obese and asthmatic, so she rarely left the comfort of an air conditioned room while the sun was out. All of the years I knew her, she slept late and lounged around in her pajamas, chain smoking Kool cigarettes, watching soap operas and movies and cooking all day. You don't get her size without knowing how to cook! Ricky was a Mexican and he boasted that Aunt Lema was a better cook than any Mexican woman he ever met, even his own momma! She was also very charismatic and humorous. She sometimes called me over to her to tell me jokes or poke fun at people. I loved her and enjoyed hanging out with her and my mom when we all lived together. She could not stand the smell of marijuana, though, and she made us go outside to get high.

There was a swimming pool at the motel, between the office building and rooms. My mom warned me to stay out of it. The water was murky, dark green and reeked. A thick layer of dark green algae covered the concrete, lily pads and grass floated along the surface. But it was so hot outside and I wanted to go swimming so badly that I decided to take my chances. After all, hadn't I swam in worse waters?

I tentatively tested the water by running my foot through it. I sat at the edge of the pool and kicked my legs knee-deep. It felt thick and grimy. I finally built enough courage to jump in. I pinched my nose and sank into the water for a second, tried swimming with one arm, then shot back to the surface. I felt nauseated and climbed out quickly. I ran to our room, anxious to get in the shower and scrub myself clean. "Oh my god, Robert!" My mother cried when she saw me. "What did you do to your hair, boy?" "Nothing. Why?" "Go look in the mirror." I hurried to the bathroom mirror. My hair was light green! It took a couple of weeks to wash the green out. In the meantime, I was the butt of everyone's jokes.

Austin, Texas - Another Dirt Motel

Summer of 1990

Ultimately, San Antonio didn't work out for us. Ricky had family further north in Austin and thought there would be a better chance of finding work there, so we hit the road again. My memory of San Antonio is vague because I rarely left our motel, but Austin left an indelible impression on my ten year old mind. The sparkling skyscrapers in downtown, pristine office buildings and shopping malls along the freeways, the beautiful

rotunda capitol building at the end of 6th Street, where the freaky, tattooed and pierced people with colored mohawks hung out at night. Hot college girls in tight shorts and tank tops walked the sidewalks, rich kids in sports cars cruised the boulevards and sharply dressed business people were everywhere. There were smooth, white concrete surfaces all over the city--a skater's haven! Everything in the city looked new and clean, but of course we found the most hideous and run-down motel to rent from. We pulled off of a shiny asphalt road onto an uneven gravel driveway. Dingy-yellowish rooms flanked us. A chained dog barked at a rooster atop the back fence. Home, sweet home!

Steven landed a job washing dishes at a restaurant, while Ricky and my dad looked for something better. Each afternoon they returned looking defeated. My dad genuinely wanted to do the right thing and find a steady job to provide for his family. He often said he was tired of using a pistol to make money, that he finally realized he couldn't beat the system that way.

To cheer him up one day I asked my dad if he wanted to play a little 10 Yard Fight. He loved that game because it allowed him to utilize his knowledge of football by giving him options of different schemes and formations to select from, on both offense and defense, prior to each play. He did well when he played it by himself, competing against the program, but he NEVER beat me. Not that I knew the game of football better--I certainly did not—it was just that I had a knack for beating video games. I discovered a glitch in the program that enabled me to score every time I had the ball on offense and stymie my opponent's scoring drives on defense. I tried to teach him the tricks, but he didn't catch on. He'd get so pissed during my merciless beat-downs that he'd start manhandling the controller and shouting at the screen! I only laughed at him and showed him up with a victory song and dance every time I scored. My mom got mad at me for it, told me to let him win sometime, but I never did.

One time Dad snapped after I stopped him on downs. He shot out of his chair and snatched the game out of the Nintendo, ran to the front door and yanked it open, then chucked the game across the parking lot! He turned to me with his tongue clenched between his teeth. "You get your goddamn ass out of here before I beat you to death, boy!"

He scared the shit out of me. I went to find my game. I couldn't believe he threw it out! My fear turned into anger as I searched between automobiles. How could he be such a sore loser? It's only a game, I thought. I found the circuit board without the casing. After examining it I wondered if it might still work. I waited for my father to leave the room before inserting the game into the console. It worked! He later found me playing it and laughed in disbelief. At first I was nervous when he entered the room, but he put his arm around me and apologized for acting crazy. I decided that he was just frustrated because he couldn't find a job.

Eddie and Debbie's Apartments-Austin

Summer of 1990

After a few weeks in Austin, and the only steady source of income being Steven's meager dish-washing check, we all moved in with Ricky's brother Eddie and chick Debbie at their apartment. Ricky is about ten years older than his brother, but he and Eddie closely resemble each other with slim builds, curved noses and curly black hair. Ricky's love for country and Tex Mex music distinguished him from Eddie, who was a metalhead and ran with the likes of my cousin John in his younger years. While their musical preferences differed, they shared the same taste in women. Debbie was a younger version of Aunt Lema: white, obese and a helluva cook! We joked that Ricky and Eddie HAD to be on top during sex!

Part of the agreement in staying with Eddie and Debbie was to keep the cupboards stocked. That was not a problem with Aunt Lema and Ricky around! It seemed like every night they'd hit the grocery stores, checks in hand. It was summertime and I liked staying up late with Aunt Lema, Ricky and Debbie watching TV. Aunt Lema would call me over and wrap her arm around me and ask me what I was craving to eat? I'd tell her, we'd all pile in the car to go get it and then return with a trunk full of groceries. One thing's for certain--I never went hungry with Aunt Lema around!

An Easy Mark

Eddie and Debbie lived on a long boulevard of apartment complexes. There were a couple of swimming pools in their complex that I swam in a lot while we were there, but there weren't any kids my age living there so I was usually alone. After a few days of canvassing the place I grew bored and decided to check out the other apartment complexes and search for someone to hang out with.

The boulevard was separated by a median with small trees, trimmed shrubs, concrete fountains and rest benches. The further I walked the more luxurious the complexes became. Some were gated with signs saying, "No Trespassers Allowed!" Those never deterred me. I met lots of kids of various ages and backgrounds that summer, swam in their pools, rode their skateboards and bikes, played their games, ate out of their refrigerators, and I had a blast running from one apartment building to the other.

One afternoon I ran into some black kids wearing backpacks. They were on a bench in the median when I walked up. One dude had a Nintendo cartridge in his hand, and he was telling the others about it. Being the video game lover that I am, I joined their conversation. The name of the game in question was "Contra" and they were arguing about the code to get 99 free men. None of them knew the exact code, so I told them. "It's simple: up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, A, B, B, A, select, start---BAM! 99 free men!"

They pulled out paper and pens and wrote it down. One kid about my age asked me if I had any games of my own. We exchanged titles and he offered me a sweet deal: my three games for five of his! I quickly agreed, and we set up a rendezvous for later that afternoon. I ran home to get my games.

With the games he wanted in my hand, I waited for him at the agreed upon location: the entrance to an apartment building. He was late. I waited for almost an hour. Just as I was about to give up and go home I saw him crossing the street, headed my way. "You got the games?" He asked. "Yeah." I produced them. His eyes lit up and he smiled. "Cool! Ok, I'm a go get mines and drop these off at the crib. Wait here and I'll be back with yours." "Okay, but . . . can't I come with you?" "Naw, Homie. My T-Jones ain't cool with me lettin' people in da crib. Just chill here. I gotcha!"

He got me alright. I let him disappear around the corner with my games. After about twenty minutes I grew apprehensive and went looking for him. He wasn't anywhere to be found. I asked some kids if they knew him, gave them a description. They didn't think he lived there. For days I walked the boulevard hoping to find the little motherfucker. I never did. I'd been had. I felt so stupid, so naïve. I felt like an idiot for just giving my games away.

Chicks Win Every Time

While looking for the thief I met a kid about a year younger than me named James. James was short and stocky with dirty blond hair and he lived in the nicest complex on the strip. It was a place I'd been ran out of before. James and I hit it off immediately. He invited me to his apartment to meet his mom, a blonde hippy chick who stayed stoned all day. These were my kind of people. We hung out in his room, playing Nintendo, watching TV, listening to metal. He had a huge aquarium that stretched half the length of his room. I liked to space out on it after getting high.

When we weren't hanging out at his place, James and I hit the swimming pool. It was huge. The small pool up front was elevated and water flowed into the lower larger section of the pool. There were two diving boards and fold out chairs for sunbathers. We took turns doing different dives off the high-dive, always trying to one-up each other. Like my brother and I did years before, James and I played the game where you dive for loose change, with a few new twists to it.

For about a month James and I got along great. Then a group of girls showed up at the pool, wearing bathing suits and giggling incessantly. I'm a natural show-off. As soon as the chicks arrived I became highly competitive with James, showcasing my full repertoire of swimming skills. One of the girls, a cute brown headed chick close to my age, named Jessica, liked me. I noticed her smiles, the way she cut her eyes at me, how she perked up

and clapped when I beat James at something. When her friends wanted to leave the pool, Jessica stayed. They argued with her before they left, but she wasn't going anywhere. That made me pretty happy.

At that point, all I wanted to do was hang out at the pool with Jessica. Over the next few days we talked to her, swam with her, spent all day down by the pool with her. James got jealous because Jessica clearly had a crush on me. He repeatedly tried to get me to come up to his room to play games, enticing me with promises of smoking his mom's pot and munching out of his refrigerator. I rejected him. He got angry and started getting ugly. He teased, "Robert and Jessica sitting in the tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G...." "What, are you five?" I laughed at him. "Grow up, Fat Boy!" "Yeah," Jessica chimed in. "Grow up already. Why don't you just go play with yourself?" We laughed even harder. James threw a tantrum. He demanded that I leave the apartments. He said I was only allowed in the complex because I was his guest. We only mocked him further and he ran off, red-faced.

Shortly thereafter a security guard showed up with James and asked me my name and where I lived. I wasn't allowed on the premises without accompanying a resident. I looked at Jessica but she stayed silent. I took that to mean that she didn't want her parents knowing she invited a boy to swim with her. So I left. It was all for the best. My time in Austin was limited anyway.

C' Mon, You're Driving

Things in Austin weren't shaping up the way we'd hoped. My dad found work in construction, but it was a temporary job. After it was completed he got with Ricky, and they decided to drive down to Corpus Christi for a couple of weeks to job hunt. I got to go with them.

We stayed at Chris' house on the south side of Corpus. Chucky had just dropped out of high school, and his mother was on him constantly about getting a job. She promised that he would be out on the street if he didn't come up with something soon. It was an empty threat, and everyone knew it. Chucky was as immature as ever, rolling his eyes at her and then winking at me. "Stop your bitching, Mom! I'm going out right now to find a job. I'll take little Robert with me."

We walked down to a convenience store and played video games. I thought Chucky was spoiled rotten. His parents bought him expensive clothes. His room was decked out with a new TV, VCR, stereo system and a Nintendo with over twenty games. He took it all for granted.

Aunt Lema's youngest daughter Carrol lived with her two kids, Savannah and Crystal, at her boyfriend's dad's trailer about five miles away from Chris. They were about fifteen deep in a 3-bedroom trailer. They exemplified white trash: small kids running around

barefoot in the mud, screaming at the top of their lungs; bags of crushed cans lined along the front porch; a broken down Chevy truck on cinder blocks; country music blaring out of speakers positioned in windows; the smell of marijuana and alcohol from the driveway; a group of burnt-out bikers and rednecks carrying on at a table in the front yard. We fit right in.

My dad, Ricky, Chucky and I showed up to say hello to Carrol and her girls one day. Everyone was thrilled to see us and soon a party kicked off. (If the party ever really ended with these people? They probably found any reason a good reason to celebrate!) Ricky used his handy check book to buy a couple cases of beer and food to barbecue. While most of the adults lounged around outside drinking, smoking and grilling, I watched Beverly Hills Cop in the livingroom with a group of kids and an older woman who was their grandma, I think.

I fell asleep on the couch after eating. A little while later a cacophony of curses and shouting woke me up. I ran to the front door and saw Uncle Ricky pulling my father away from Carrol's stepfather. They'd gotten into a drunken argument, and my father felt disrespected. Suddenly, my father jerked free of Ricky, reached into his pocket and flipped open his Buck knife. "Who's goddamned side are you on, Meskin?!"

Ricky raised his hands into the air and backed up. "Now, Sam. You're drunk and paranoid. Put the knife up, Man." "You watch it or I'll cut your motherfuckin' heart out." My father told Ricky, who retreated even further. "Goddammit, Uncle Sam!" Carrol shouted from the porch. "You always gotta pull a fuckin' knife! I ain't havin' it in front of my babies! Leave! Now!" My father, falling down drunk, stared at Carrol briefly, nodded and walked towards the car. He saw me in the yard and called me over. He opened the driver's side door and leaned against the car a moment to steady himself. He cursed Ricky under his breath and said we were leaving. I was concerned. "You ain't in no shape to drive, Dad."

He thought about that a second before saying, "You're right. C'mon, you're driving." My father reached into his pocket and handed me the keys. I got behind the wheel and he was in the passenger's seat. I was shaking with excitement and fear. I adjusted the seat as high and as far forward as it would go and still could barely see over the dash board. After a couple of deep breaths, I cranked the engine and put it in reverse. Somehow I managed to get us to a grocery store a few miles away. I parked and told my father I was scared and needed a second to collect myself. He laughed, leaned over and hugged me, commended me on a job well done and switched places with me. We made it back to Chris' in one piece.

Over the next couple of days he patched things up with Ricky. They soon realized that there wasn't any future for us in Corpus Christi, and the three of us left in the middle of the night.

James Terry's House-Cloverleaf

Late Summer of 1990

We returned to Austin for a few days. Steven had been fired from his job, and with nothing else on the horizon Dad thought it was best to head over to Houston. Aunt Lema and Ricky stayed in Austin with Eddie and Debbie.

We were welcomed by James Terry and his wife Sheryl. They said we could stay with them on Eagle Pass in Cloverleaf until we could get on our feet. James Terry was still running his tree service, which had prospered for years in Houston. His success was mostly because he was a master tree-climber, one of Houston's best, and had a great record of not damaging homes and property during a job. When we moved in James taught my brother and Mike, who'd already been living there with Tammie and their kids, all the tricks of the trade. They practiced climbing the pines and oaks in James' yard. They learned how to shoot up a tree in spurs, wear a safety belt properly and tie a variety of complex knots used for maneuvering in a tree and safely bringing it down, piece-by-piece. Climbing trees is extremely dangerous, particularly 150+ foot pines and rotten oaks that crumble away with every stab of a spur. More often than not, these trees hover over homes, threatening them with their dead limbs. You've gotta remove the tree without incurring any property damage or hurting yourself. This is why a good climber is paid twice as much as a ground hand, and it's also why my brother was determined to master the art of climbing.

In time by brother's tree-climbing skills surpassed James'. I marveled at how proficient he was at "running up a tall tree" and meticulously bringing it down without incident. One of the most thrilling and dangerous jobs in tree removal is topping out a tall pine tree. The climber shimmies up the tree with a small chainsaw, removing the limbs as he goes, leaving about a 15-20 foot top. Imagine the strong wind up there, swaying the tree and climber back and forth. A rope is tied to the top and the ground hands are pulling on it, directing it where they hope it'll land. The climber positions himself about 10 feet under the rope and cuts his wedge. As he gets ready to cut the back side and top the pine he yells, "Go, Go, GOOO!!" and the ground hands give it their all as the top comes crashing down. Once the top starts its descent the remaining pole and climber swings violently back and forth about 15 feet in either direction, and the climber holds on for dear life! I've watched my brother perform this to perfection countless times. He called it "riding the bull."

James and Sheryl had three kids. Ray-Ray was about seven years old when we lived with them. Leona was five, and Jamie was four. After the men left for work, Ray-Ray and I practiced climbing trees ourselves. We could easily climb the oaks, but the pines were

intimidating. My skinny ten year old legs barely fit into the spurs. Ray-Ray couldn't get into them at all. One day, I managed to climb about forty feet and grab the first limb. I looked down and was paralyzed by fear. As sweat beaded up over my body and face, I held a death grip on the tree. Ray-Ray laughed at me and called me a chicken. He said I could climb down if I climbed up. I tried to step my way back down and managed a few feet, but I was fatigued from the climb up, stabbing the spurs into the tree, and standing up there for so long. I didn't have the strength to stab my way back down. Finally, I wrapped my arms and legs around the pole and slid down about three feet at a time, completely ruining my clothes and scratching my legs and body up. As soon as I caught my breath I ran after Ray-Ray and roughed him up for laughing at me!

Ray-Ray was like my little brother. When school started that fall we both attended Northshore Elementary together. I was in 5th grade, and he was in 2nd grade. Several years before, Ray-Ray pulled a pot of boiling water off the stove and burned his face and body badly. He had terrible scars from it all over. They made him a target at Northshore Elementary with some of the bullies. I watched him get shoved into the grass on the playground one day by a bigger boy, and it ran me hot. So I took it upon myself to toughen him up. We used to watch old Bruce Lee movies and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles together, so naturally we thought of ourselves as ninjas! I was the sansei, and he my student. Every day we practiced kicks, roundhouses, punches and tripping moves. He gained a tremendous amount of confidence in a short period of time and was determined not to let anyone push him around anymore.

After dark one evening we were out in the front yard play-fighting when three men walked past our place into the depths of Cloverleaf. My father, James, Mike, Steven and James' brother David were on the front porch, relaxing after a long day's work. I sensed movement and looked down the street where the three men were brawling. I shouted to the porch, "Those dudes are fighting!"

The men all cleared the porch and ran down the street to the action. Ray-Ray and I followed but kept our distance. It was so dark that I couldn't see what all was going on, but they were all fighting. Moments later it was over. They picked a guy up off the ground and carried him back to our front porch. The stranger had been beaten badly. James sat him down on a chair as Sheryl gave him a rag. Then he told his story. "I met those boys down at Freeport Ice House. They invited me to their place to buy a quarter bag of weed, and they said it was only a short walk away. We get down here on Eagle Pass and as soon as we passed the lights they turn on me, jump me and steal my wallet. They seen you guys coming and ran off. Then you all show up and beat the crap out of me some more!"

Everyone apologized to the man, made light of it by joking with him and offering him a beer, which he accepted gratefully. James fired up a joint and passed it to him. "Man," James began, "we thought you boys were startin' shit, didn't really know what was happening, but I ain't havin' it on my block, in front of my house." James apparently felt

guilty because he gave the dude a quarter sack of pot for free and they later drove him home. Before he left the man had a serious look as he said, "One thing I learned for sure tonight: I will never walk down Eagle Pass at night again!" That brought on the laughter again.

The streets of Cloverleaf have always been rough.

A Glimpse at Eternity

My Mom called me into the bedroom before school one morning. She'd been crying and was holding my dad, who stared at me somberly. Mom motioned me to join them and broke the news. Grandma Johnson died the previous night. I'd just woken up so it took a moment to sink in. Although there weren't any tears in his eyes, I could tell my dad was suffering. It confused me because he never spoke kindly of his mother. He used to make jokes about her, like how she loved her dog more than him because she gave the dog and everyone else but him a gift at Christmas. I held resentment towards Grandma Johnson for not helping us out when Dad was in prison. I hadn't forgotten her hissing at me during church years before, either. Her passing didn't sadden me in the least. The only thing I felt was relief because I knew I'd be out of school for the funeral.

That afternoon we were greeted by Uncles Dewey and Bill, along with Aunt Lema, at Grandma Johnson's apartment on the north side of Houston in Spring-Cypress. Throughout the day and night more family members arrived, some I'd never even met, to mourn and support each other. When Chris' family showed up I followed Chucky to the back patio to sneak drags off his cigarette. Nancy's girls, Brandy and Michelle, joined us, along with Cousin Carrol. Michelle, who was about 17 at the time and a couple of years older than her sister, wasn't at all happy to be there. "This fucking sucks! No one even liked that old cunt. She was selfish and mean and hated us all." "Don't you let your grandma [Lema] hear you talk like that," Carrol warned Michelle. "For some reason she loved that old hag. Be nice. We'll only be here a few days."

Aunt Lema was near hysteria when we first got there. My father sat with her all afternoon and through everything that followed. The next day we all went to the funeral home to view the body and pay our respects. Brother Nash embraced my dad and Lema at the door, as if they were family. Small groups of three or four walked up to the casket to see Grandma Johnson. I waited with Carrol, Brandy and Michelle for our turn. As they complained and gossiped, my eyes were glued to the casket. I'd never been to a funeral home or seen a dead body in real life before. As we stepped close I grew apprehensive. Would she look mangled and grotesque? I didn't really know what to expect.

I'm not sure if the others saw what I saw when I looked into the casket. Grandma Johnson wore a dark blue blouse, her grey hair was in curls, and she had make-up on. She looked angry and bitter, just as I'd remembered her in life. Were my perceptions influenced by my negative thoughts and feelings for her, the few bad experiences with her, combined with the enmity radiating from my cousins? Probably. I didn't understand that then, though.

In the few moments that I looked at her corpse, I wondered about her soul. Was she in heaven like Brother Nash said? He described streets of gold and singing angels, a river of milk and honey and no more pain and sorrow. Grandma Johnson seemed too mean for heaven. Yet my dad and Lema clearly loved her, so perhaps there was something good about her.

My reverie was broken when Michelle whispered to Carrol, "Is it just me or are you suddenly turned on?" "I'm horny as fuck!" They smiled at each other. "I can't wait to get me some later." Fuck you, Bitch!" Michelle slapped Carrol playfully on the back. "It's not fair that my man isn't here and yours is! Care to share?" They giggled together and we walked away.

Spring-Cypress Apartments

Early Fall of 1990

Grandma Johnson's apartments were in the middle of the affluent and developing Spring-Cypress community. The brick buildings were ornamented with varnished oak-siding and connected by sparkling white sidewalks. Each apartment had a back patio, most of which were decorated with ivies and various plants. They had four swimming pools, two washaterias and a gym (members only, I discovered). There was a wooden fence around three quarters of the apartments, but the side we parked on was open to a small cypress forest. After the funeral, Dewey, who'd been living with Grandma when she died, asked us to move in with him. Aunt Lema and Uncle Ricky were also invited, but there was plenty of room with 3 bedrooms.

Chucky stayed with us for about ten days after the funeral. His mom had been constantly riding him about not working so he stayed in Houston and got a job with Uncle Dewey at the truck stop. Dewey was the head cook/manager of the restaurant linked to a truck stop on I-45 North, between Spring and The Woodlands. He got both Steven and Chucky jobs. Chucky didn't realize, at first, that Dewey was only being kind to him because he was attracted to him! As soon as he figured it out he blew up on him and quit his job, then took the first bus back down to Corpus Christi. Before he left he told me, "Aunt Dewey doesn't know who he's fucking with! I'll kill that faggot!"

Before he left, Chucky taught me how to steal sodas from the vending machines. We were down at the pool closest to the coke machines and I asked him for fifty cents to buy one. "Why spend money when they're free?" He asked. He said his arm was too big, but my long, skinny arms would slip perfectly into the dispenser and I could easily pry cans loose. I was able to pull this trick off for at least a couple of years before my arm grew too big.

Once again, there weren't many kids my age living in our apartments. Most of the tenets were old and Dewey constantly had to admonish me for making too much noise and disturbing them. I did meet a geeky boy my age with super thick glasses. He didn't like being outside, I learned. I tried to get his help building a clubhouse in the woods and he would have none of it. "I'd rather read in my room." "Read?!" I was mortified. "You mean, like, books?" "Well, yeah. Don't you read books? I love books." "Only if I have to! Damn sure not for fun! C'mon, man. There's gotta be something fun you like doing?" "I have a computer with games." Bingo! He invited me up to his room where we played a role playing game - similar to Dungeons-n' Dragons-on his personal computer. The kid was a complete dork. During the game he talked science and challenged me to a spell! No wonder he didn't have any friends. His mom was thrilled that I hung out with him. She brought us baked goodies and glasses of milk every time I showed up, and I always admired her tight body on the way out of his room. Everything was cool until she caught me smoking a cigarette in their bathroom. She made me leave. At least she didn't tell on me. If my dad would've found out I was smoking cigarettes back then he would've busted my ass!

Making Adjustments

Moving to Spring-Cypress meant changing schools, something I had to do with alarming regularity throughout the 5th grade. At times it wasn't easy adjusting to new curriculum, leaving friends behind and making new ones. At Spring-Cypress Elementary I felt like a total outsider. There were a lot of preppy rich kids with expensive clothes and shoes. I caught a lot of dirty looks in my worn-out Rustler jeans and Chuck Taylor's. I felt very self-conscious.

In the classroom they were well ahead of where I'd left off at Northshore. With the help of my nice (and pretty) teacher I soon caught up with the rest of the class. As I began to match scores with the smartest kids in the class I made a couple of friends, but this only worked to alienate me further from the snobs. Some people you just can't please.

At recess, and in gym class, I exerted my physical prowess, again establishing myself as the fastest kid in school. My grit and determination during games won the admiration of some and secured me as one of the top three picks in contests. It also incited a few kids'

animosity. There was a redheaded boy who stayed neck and neck with me in most competitions. Somehow we always ended up on opposing teams, battling each other. He won some; I won some. I had respect for his skills and complimented him a couple of times. He simply brushed me off and remained standoffish.

Things heated up between us during a kickball game once. I played short stop and caught a weak pop fly off his foot. I smiled at him as he walked back to the dugout. When it was my turn to kick for my team I shot a base knock beyond his outstretched hands. He pounded the ground in frustration. Later, with my team leading and him representing the tying run at the plate he kicked a fast roller right to me. I slipped and fell as he ran to first base, but quickly regained my footing and launched the ball at him. I hit him in the legs and knocked him down.

Kids were laughing at him as I pumped my fist in the air, celebrating getting him out. The next thing I knew he was charging me, wrestling me to the ground. I put him in the headlock and pulled his hair before the coach could separate us. We were sent to the office for fighting.

To make matters worse the redheaded kid's ex-girlfriend liked me. I used to walk alone around the basketball court at lunch recess until she joined me one afternoon. She had dark brown hair, a smidgen of freckles and a cute smile. She wanted to know why I was walking alone. I guess she didn't get the memo that I was the new kid that no one liked. She asked if I had a girlfriend yet. Nope, not me. She said she only asked because one of her "friends" wanted to know. Riiight! When I asked her which friend she said she promised not to tell. I knew of most of her friends. They were the same ones that turned their noses up to me. When I sat with her at lunch she caught a lot of flak from her peers. They made her feel bad about sitting with the boy that got her (ex) boyfriend in trouble for fighting. She eventually succumbed to the peer pressure, and I got the cold shoulder. Thankfully, I wasn't at Spring-Cypress very long.

James Terry's House Part II-Fall of 1990

Dewey told my dad that the manager was tired of getting complaints about me. The old folks just weren't accustomed to having a noisy kid like me running around. Someone had also reported seeing me stealing from the Coke machines. Rather than risk Dewey being evicted, my dad moved us out. I don't think he had any luck finding work out there anyway, but he knew there was money working with James Terry.

Our second stint at James Terry's was cut short after just a couple of weeks. I didn't even re-enroll at Northshore. James, my dad, brother and Mike would go out cutting trees and wouldn't return until after dark most nights. They took turns taking showers. While waiting for James to get out of the shower so one of them could get in, I overheard Steven

joking with Mike and my dad about Sheryl. Sheryl was in her mid-twenties back then, had dirty blonde hair and a rockin' body. Steven said, "Oh yeah, I tapped that the other day....she's a dead fuck, though. Just lays there like Emma Bradshaw." They laughed about it then, but Mike later told James what Steven said. James was a strapping young man. He was built similar to Mike and Steven. I was in the room with Dad and Steven when James stormed in. "You fuckin' my ol lady, man?!" "No way, man!" Steven said. Mike had followed James into the room. He said, "That ain't what you said at the kitchen table!" "I was fucking joking, Mike! You've said much worse shit and you know it."

James was furious. He ripped his shirt off, whipped his long blond hair behind him, pounded his chest and stomped his foot on the floor. "Come on with it! One of you motherfuckers want a piece of me? I'll beat your goddamned asses!" I noticed my father standing off to the side. He reached into his back pocket. Mike saw it too and he lunged at my father, shoved him onto the bed. "Watch his ass! He likes to pull knives! Ain't gonna be none of that shit here, Uncle Sam!" Steven took a step towards Mike. James, suddenly the voice of reason, tried to settle them down. He stepped between Steven and Mike. "Everyone just calm the fuck down. You boys are like my blood. I love you motherfuckers and will help you however I can. Anytime, anyplace, and you know it. But there's too many hard dicks living here. If you got someplace to go you need to do that. I'm a jealous motherfucker, and I'd hate to have to kill one of you bastards over my old lady!" Still, James remained one of our best friends. Through the years he was always there for us in times of need, and likewise we put him up when he and Sheryl had their problems. But the next day we gathered out things and moved to keep the peace between our families.

Mitchell Rd-Homegrown Style

Late Fall of 1990

After they left Dewey's place, Aunt Lema and Uncle Ricky moved into a two bedroom trailer on the north side of Houston off of Mitchell Road. An older Arab man and his wife owned the lot with several trailers. They didn't care how many people lived in their trailers as long as they got their rent money. We all moved in along with Mike and Tammie and their kids. Time and again, our family proved we knew how to pack it into any trailer!

Several things stand out about the trailer on Mitchell Road. First, we didn't have hot water. Aunt Lema used to bribe me with food to heat up pots of water on the stove and microwave for her daily bath. She was way too lazy to tote the pots to and fro! Several times, when it got cold outside, I heated up my own bath water, but mostly I took two

minutes ice cold showers. I found that singing "This Old Man" super-fast, over and over, helped me get through the showers!

It wasn't until after we moved out that the trailer got hot water. Junior had come up from Aransas Pass to visit his momma and he walked outside to take a look at the water heater. "Here's your problem right here! It's gotta be plugged in!"

We weren't there over a month, but it was a month of utter boredom. I was a kid, and again, there wasn't anyone close to my age to hang out with. The Arab owner didn't like me meddling around the place either. What to do? I walked up and down Mitchell Road, knocking on doors, asking the residents if they needed any odd work done around their place. For a small fee I would offer my assistance. I cleaned out one guy's gutters for ten bucks. A couple of people let me cut their yards, with their lawnmowers. I spent every cent earned down at the corner store on snacks and arcade games.

The thing I remember most about the trailer on Mitchell Road is all the homegrown pot! When we first moved in, Dad, Steven and Mike continued to work with James. The problem was that James lived about forty-five minutes away in Cloverleaf. The commute became costly. So they started working with Charles Goss of American Trees out in the Woodlands, a much closer drive. Charles paid his ground hands \$35.00 a day and climbers a meager \$75.00 per day, whereas James was paying \$50/\$100 per day. The pay cut didn't sit well with Mike and Steven, so they snuck onto Charles' property late one night and stole a couple of garbage bags of pot plants! I smoked so much homegrown that I got terrible headaches. We smoked joints the size of cigars and barely got a buzz.

Skylane Apartments I-45 South

Winter of 1990 - Spring of 1991

North Shepard Drive stretches far across the north side of Houston. Car dealerships and auto salvage yards are lined up for miles and miles. My dad met Gary Wilborn at Bill Dee's Auto Salvage. They hit it off immediately. Gary was in his sixties then, snow white hair and beard. He was soft-spoken and mild-mannered, but one very savvy businessman. He owned Bill Dee's and a couple of other auto salvages in Houston. He hired my dad on the spot as a delivery driver. I still remember the smile on Dad's face when he pulled into the driveway on Mitchell Road in his small Toyota delivery truck, how happy he was to have landed a good job. The \$250 per week starting salary wasn't the greatest, but it was pretty good back in 1990. Especially considering he got to take the delivery truck home and was given gas and lunch money everyday. It was a huge improvement over the \$35 a day he made with Charles Goss, who only worked three or four times a week at best.

Besides, Gary and my father became friends. Over the next five years Gary helped us many times when we struggled.

We were soon able to afford our own place again. The Skylane apartments are located right off the feeder on I-45 South. With Gary's help we were able to put down a deposit and a month's rent on a nice two bedroom apartment.

Steven found a job at another auto salvage yard on North Shepard pulling parts and digging holes in the ground. Cars were artistically buried-front-end first-into the ground as if they'd plunged from the roof of the nearby building into the dirt. With both Steven and Dad working steady jobs, things began looking up for us.

Dewey couldn't afford the apartment in Spring-Cypress after he lost his job at the truck stop. Dad helped him get a job as a night security guard at Bill Dee's and he moved in with us, splitting the rent and further relieving Dad and Steven's burden. After my father threatened him years before we never again had to worry about Aunt Dewey pulling any sexual stunts with any of us. In fact, we always got along great with him, while we were all still free.

More help arrived about a month later. My mom and Steven were grocery shopping at the Fiesta supermarket on Airline when they thought the old man digging in the dumpster looked familiar. He should have. It was Grandpa Sutton! After nearly five years of not knowing where he was, if he was dead or alive, we found Grandpa! My dad hadn't seen him since the 1970's. They had a beer together and caught up with each other in our living room. Grandpa looked much older than I remembered him. Living on the streets was wearing on him. Dad insisted that he move in with us. We set him up a bed in the dining room, right next to the Christmas tree. It felt awesome having Grandpa around again. He was a hustler and often brought money home to help Dad out. He'd been living out of his van when Mom and Steven found him. He was just as happy to be reunited with us as we were with him.

In da Ghetto

The Skylane Apartments are on the edge of Acres Home, a crime-ridden and gang-infested ghetto. Dope dealers struck deals on street corners, crack heads and winos drowned their sorrows under underpasses and behind convenience stores, places of business and homes had bars in the windows and graffiti covered the sides of every building. It was common to hear gunshots and sirens at all hours. Our apartments were relatively safe, though. I was warned to stay on the premise at all times. Of course I never abided by the rules. I always tested my boundaries. During the day, while my dad was at work, I often jumped the fence and ran down to the Chinese store to play games. Or I'd cross the freeway to the Fiesta and go-cart track next to it. If I didn't have any money to

ride the go-carts I'd panhandle at the Mexican table-shops in front of Fiesta. I wasn't deterred when old men in trucks stopped next to me and asked why a pretty little white boy was all by himself. I just hauled ass!

I was enrolled in a predominantly black school to resume the 5th grade. The differences were immediately apparent. My teacher was Mr. Henry, a gentle giant with charcoal skin and salt-n-pepper hair. He had absolutely zero control over our class. Kids slept during lessons, refused to do assignments and cussed him out with little consequence. He thought that reason would prevail. Instead of getting loud and angry or sending a kid to the principal's office for acting out in class, he would pull you up in a chair next to him and talk to you as if you were his own son or daughter. "Look here now. Do you want to be stuck in this dump the rest of your life? The only way out is an education. Please don't mess your life up. Please let me help you." Very few seemed to listen.

The curriculum was far behind Cypress'. I breezed through the assignments. Most of the time I sat idly at my desk. As hard as I tried, I never fit in there. Most of those kids were taught that all white people were the source of their problems and, being the only white kid in the class, I could feel some of their anger and resentment. But I liked Mr Henry and tried to help him around the class and with students who had learning disabilities.

The competition was fierce at recess. Most of the boys were strong, fast and agile. Some had a fluidity of movement unlike anything I'd ever seen. I went from being an elite athlete in my other schools to a middle-of-the-pack contender. I still held my own in most sports, but any victory was hard-fought and truly earned. I lost a whole lot more than I was used to. Nevertheless, I remained an exceptional sprinter. There were only two kids, a set of twins that were clearly faster than me. They had blazing speed and usually finished every race in first and second place, although I beat them a few times. Most of us, though, were happy to place third.

The biggest difference was the vicious trash talking. Everyone "ranked," or put each other down. "Yo momma is so fat she got her own zip code!" "You so poor you ride yo' big wheel to Goodwill!" "You so ugly yo' daddy gotta tie a pork chop to your neck to get da dog to play wit ya!" It was like that all day, every day, and even more so during a game. Once, we were playing basketball and I blocked one of my classmate's shot. I rubbed it in. "Is that all you got? Not in my house you don't!"

I never saw his fist coming when I returned to class after lunch. He knocked me over a desk and to the floor, jumped on me and pummeled me with a flurry of punches. I tried to fight back, but he had the positioning, the size and strength. Mr. Henry broke us up. The kid was in a rage. "Ho-ass white boy think he bad! I'll beat yo' ho ass, white boy!" "That's why you gotta steal me?!" I screamed back. Blood ran from my mouth, and I felt my face starting to swell. I launched myself at him, but Mr. Henry caught me in mid-flight and held me back. The kid took advantage of me being restrained and slammed his fist in my

face again, shutting my eye closed. Mr. Henry yelled at him, told him to go to his desk. I'd had enough. That was the worst beating I'd ever had in my life, at that point.

Pooh Bear

Pooh Bear was a short, black kid my age that lived a couple doors down at the Skylane Apartments. Although we went to the same school, unfortunately he was in a separate class. I met him the day after we moved in, and we became instant friends. We did everything together in the apartments. My parents liked Pooh Bear, let him eat with us and spend the night on weekends. We'd stay up half the night playing games, watching TV, raiding the refrigerator and smoking pot. He did not smoke in front of my parents. I tried to pass him a joint once in their presence, and he shook his head a firm no. His mother was a devout Christian raising her son alone. She was strict with Pooh Bear, who was a good kid for the most part, and he followed her orders fearfully. He didn't want word getting back to her that he was smoking dope. I watched her spank him once so I understood his docility.

In the field behind our apartments, Pooh and I practiced back flips. I saw him do one off of the short, wooden fence by the sidewalk and was astonished. I asked him to teach me. We practiced on an old mattress under a huge oak tree. "The key," he said, "is not being afraid. Just do it." In no time I could do a back flip on the mattress, but it took about a week to build my confidence to attempt one on grass. After I successfully completed my first one, it was all I wanted to do. I learned to do them off of the fence, benches and card, with a perfect landing every time. At school and before class started, Pooh and I drew a crowd with our acrobatic maneuvers. I loved the attention I got from sprinting into a cartwheel and full-tuck back flip (without hands) on the concrete slab.

I don't recall what it was behind, but Pooh and I got into an argument one day. We weren't playing with each other. He sat on the concrete slab under the stairs, and I did flips in the grass yard between our apartments. My father and Steven emerged from our apartment and noticed we weren't hanging out together. My father asked, "Why ain't you playin' with your friend?" "He ain't my friend no more." "Oh yeah?" I could smell alcohol on my father's breath. He reached into his back pocket and removed his Buck knife. He flipped it open and handed it to me. "Then I suggest you take care of your business, boy." My hand shook with trepidation as I stared at the knife. I looked up at Pooh Bear. He was watching me closely now. For a brief instant, I allowed my anger over our argument to control me. Wielding the knife head level so he could see it clearly, I took steps towards him, hoping to scare him. It worked. He jumped up and ran home in tears, screaming bloody murder! I suddenly felt guilty for frightening my friend. I handed the knife back to my father. He told me to go inside and deny everything if anyone asks what happened.

It was several days before Pooh would even speak to me. I caught him coming out of his apartment and told him I was sorry. He shot a stern look at me, crossed his arms in defiance. "Why you do it if you sorry?" I explained I was mad at him over our argument, that I'd never use it, just wanted to scare him. I stuck my hand out and apologized again. He stared at it a moment before relaxing and shaking my hand.

Later he joked, "We cool and everything, but don't think my black ass is ever comin' to yo' crib again. Yo' daddy is one crazy white motherfucker!"

Love Transmissions

Steven lost his job pulling parts and started relieving Dewey as nighttime security guard at Bill Dee's a couple of times per week. The auto salvage yards along North Shepard were susceptible to burglaries late at night. There was a small patch of woods separating them from Acres home, making them an easy target for thieves. A couple of years later, I helped my dad and Steven build a sheet metal fence around Bill Dee's, but back in 1991, when Gary was being burgled several times a month, he needed a security guard to patrol the place at night.

A couple of times I got to go to work with Steven, help keep him awake through the night. It was perfect bonding time for us. We rode around in a small Toyota, similar to Dad's delivery truck, with a couple of pistols and shotguns. We listened to Z-Rock 106.9 FM, got high and joked the night away. It was a macabre scene late at night, all of the smashed vehicles in which many lost their lives. Gary Wilborn was smart. He knew that there was money in the auto salvage business in Houston, one of the worst cities in America for auto accidents.

We were parked with the engine idling and heater on because it was colder than a witch's tit in a brass bra outside. The headlights illuminated a rack of transmissions; I rolled us a joint. Steven asked me, "You ever fuck a transmission?" "What?" I couldn't help but laugh. "No way, man." "You don't know what you're missing." He smiled knowingly at the transmissions. "Shut the fuck up!" The mere thought of it had me laughing uncontrollably. I fired the joint up and took a hit, passed it to him. "No, really." He tried to suppress a laugh. "See that one there dripping fluid? See that hole in the center? Oh man, it feels so good fucking that wet hole! Go try it, you'll see."

The absurdity of it gripped me. Had I not been stoned, I wouldn't have thought twice about doing it. It never would've happened! But I was feeling silly and highly amused so I stepped out into the cold and walked to the transmission rack. I could see my breath it was so cold. I touched the side of the transmission and it was ice cold! Steven rolled his window down and called me a pussy, told me to man up and "Fuck that transmission!" I laughed even harder, called him an idiot, but I said fuck it and pulled my cock out and

inserted it into the transmission. The cold metal stung my flesh and I jerked back, sobering a bit. I reached down and found a rag to clean the fluid off, buttoned my pants up, and hurriedly returned to the warmth of the truck.

Steven was doubled over in amusement. Fucking asshole! He embarrassed me many times over the years by asking me in front of my girlfriends, "How'd you like fucking that transmission?" That's not an easy question to explain, trust me.

Problem Child

There were a few factors involved in us moving from the Skylane. First of all, my father pulled a knife on a black man who lived above us. It was a dispute over a parking spot. My father felt "contested." The black dude pulled a shotgun out of his car once he saw the knife. A few threats were exchanged and they left it at that. Somehow rumor of it got back to the manager and my parents had to field her questions. Right around this time, though, my dad was seriously questioning his judgment to move us into an all black neighborhood. He dropped me off at school one morning and got on the overpass above the school yard. He said he knew he had to move me out of there after being able to spot me clearly from high atop the freeway. I was the only white face in sea of black.

Ultimately though, I got us evicted. Our apartments were divided into a north and a south side. The office and the majority of the kids at Skylane were on the north side. At first kids could roam about the complex as we pleased. A string of fights and a broken window in one of the north end's apartments, which I was suspected of doing, forced the manager to impose a no tolerance rule: All unsupervised kids had to stay on the side of the complex where they lived.

A pretty blonde named Misty had just moved into the north side of the complex. Days before the rule was posted, I'd accepted her as my girlfriend. We'd barely spent any time together at all. There was the first date: my brother drove us with several of our friends to the Northline mall arcade. I didn't have any money and my parents weren't coming off any despite my persistent begging. I was beside myself trying to figure something out. My mom finally suggested that I raid the penny bank in her room. Score!

Or so I thought. There was about \$10 in pennies in the bank, but they had to be converted into quarters to use in the arcades. The people at the arcade wanted me to roll the pennies up before they would exchange them! I was incredibly embarrassed and felt awkward asking Misty to help me roll them up. She did it, but probably only because she was too nice to reject me in front of our friends. I felt like such a loser.

Sometime after the rule went up, I snuck to the north side hoping to talk to Misty. No one was home. On the way back to the south side the manager caught me! That evening we were given a 30-day eviction notice.

Before we moved Misty broke up with me. She had the hots for a dude named Tracy, one of the "friends" that accompanied us to the mall. After I found out she liked him, I called him Dick Tracy. We fought in the parking lot. He came out on top and I stopped calling him Dick Tracy, to his face! Point is, I was ready to leave the Skylane apartments by then too.

Butch and Sherry's House-Spring of 1991

Pops Sutton knew a couple in their thirties named Butch and Sherry. They were ex-heroin addicts strung out on Methadone. Butch looked like Jesus with his long dark hair and beard. Sherry was a short brunette with a nice body, but she looked closer to fifty than thirty in the face. They'd had rough lives.

Butch and Sherry owned two houses on the same lot in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on Houston's north side. Pops arranged for us to move into the house up front, a nice brick, three bedroom with wooden floors. The place didn't have insulation or central air conditioning and heating. We used electric heaters. We also had to pay all the bills, plus give Butch and Sherry rent, which they promptly took to the Methadone clinic. There was more room for us though because Dewey had moved into an apartment alone just a block away from Bill Dee's, and Grandpa had started living with one of his friends out off East Mount Houston Road.

Butch asked us to please stay out of one of the rooms at our house until the previous renter could pick up his stuff that was still in there. I went through his stuff, and it wasn't nothing to worry about being stolen, trust me. I happened to be in the front yard when the guy showed up to haul his stuff away. He loaded it into a brand new Camero. I was admiring his ride when a crazy lady screeched to a halt in her car in our driveway. She jumped out with a baseball bat and began screaming at the guy next to his Camero about him cheating on her. He kept his distance as she smashed his windows, one-by-one. I can't say I blame him--she looked ferocious even if she was super-hot in her tight shorts and tank top.

I used to get stoned and trip out on Butch and Sherry at their place. They'd be high on Methadone, nodding in and out of consciousness, their words slurred and incoherent. I didn't understand half of what they said, but they seemed to comprehend each other well enough. After a while they'd run me off, said I needed to let them have a "grown-up talk." Peeking through their window from the outside, I learned that "grown-up talk" meant having wild and kinky sex.

Dad had bought me a relatively new BMX bike the previous Christmas. There wasn't much space to ride it at the Skylane, where I was told more than once not to take it out into the neighborhood. Dad said the dope fiends would hurt a kid for his bike and I knew

he was right, but in Butch and Sherry's neighborhood I was given free reign to ride to my heart's desire. It was an older area with lots of trees, asphalt roads and fenced in yards. I didn't know anyone yet so I cruised the streets alone, thinking about all sorts of things, enjoying the nice spring weather. There was a small super market on the corner of Aldine Westfield and Parker where Mom sometimes bought groceries. I loved playing their arcades. I liked riding up there and hanging out. They were easy to steal from. I ate my first Whatchamacallit candy bar there, or shall I say behind there. Those things are delicious.

My parents repeatedly warned me not to leave my bike in the front yard because I tended to discard it in the grass and go straight inside, so every night I parked my bike in the hallway next to our kitchen. One morning I woke up and got ready for school. I loved riding my bike to school and the sense of freedom I got from such responsibility. I looked forward to racing the other kids around the park next to our school after class let out each day. I passed through the hall and went to the bathroom and snapped! I doubled back and my bike wasn't there! I ran to the front door and it wasn't in the front yard either. I remembered that I left it out there the previous night. My bike had been stolen sometime during the night. I was devastated. Unfortunately, being a victim of theft didn't teach me it was wrong to steal. If anything it embittered me and made me want to steal even more.

I resumed the 5th grade at an elementary off of Parker, between Airline and Aldine Westfield. Ms. Roberts was my teacher. She was blonde and beautiful, the object of my desire. Every morning she told our class about the Persian Gulf War, what our soldiers were facing in the Middle East. I didn't hear half of what she said in her tight jeans. When I told my dad about her he joked, "I buy you books, send you to school, and all you do is eat the teacher!"

I tried to impress Ms. Roberts with my wit and acumen, but she knew what I was up to and it seemed to exasperate her. Surely I wasn't the first boy she taught with raging hormones. Back then I had a bad habit of saying, "I done did it" "Turn in your homework, Robert." She said. "I done did it." "Did you dust the erasers, Robert?" "I done did it!" She constantly had to tell me that was an improper sentence. She offered a few alternatives, but I kept forgetting them until her patience ran thin. She made me handwrite: I will not say "I done did it" 1,000 times. So much for my impressive acumen, eh?

At this point, I started feeling very embarrassed by my cheap clothing. In Acres Home we were all poor so it wasn't as noticeable, but those kids dressed sharp at the Parker school. Reebok had just come out with their famous pump-up shoes, and the Air Jordan's with the 23 on the side were the shit. Both shoes cost over \$100, far beyond our budget. Still, I asked my dad for a pair of the Reebok pump-ups when it came time to buy me new shoes. "Are you fucking crazy, boy? A hundred dollars for a pair of tennis shoes? We'll get you the \$5 special at Wal-Mart and you'll like it."

Instead, he took me to Academy to shop for shoes. He knew I liked playing sports and wanted to get something decent. My eyes lit up when I saw the new LA Gear pump-ups. They were only \$35! I gave my dad my saddest look as I held the shoes in my hands, knowing he wouldn't buy them. He surprised me by telling me to put them in our bag, and he got them for me!

All of the kids in my class were impressed with my new shoes. No one had even heard of the LA Gear pump-ups. I felt unique and special to have the only pair in school. Then I ran into a rich white kid from another class in the lunch room. He owned the Reebok pump-ups. "What the fuck kinda generic trash are those?" He asked me. "LA Gear? More like La Queer! What a rip off!" I got sent home for busting him in the mouth.

The first time I ever skipped school was in Ms Roberts' school. My friend Javier lived a couple blocks over and said we could hang out at his place after his mom left for work. As promised, I met him in the woods across the street from school and we waited there. After she left we kicked it in his living room, smoked some pot and listened to Vanilla Ice. A lot of people deny ever liking his music, but all the kids in the Parker school loved Vanilla Ice!

We were eating cereal on the couch, watching cable TV, when his mom walked through the front door. Apparently, she came home for lunch some days, unbeknownst to Javier because he was usually at school. We were so stoned we never even heard her pull into the driveway. At least she didn't snitch on me. She just told me to go home. I hid out in the woods until school let out.

Ambassador North Apartments-Summer of 1991

Paying for all of the utilities and Butch and Sherry's rent proved to be more than we could handle. They were heartbroken when they found out we were moving away, with their dope money. We packed up and moved about ten miles down Aldine Westfield to the Ambassador North Apartments. With all utilities paid, central A/C and heating, free cable TV and a swimming pool, it was a total upgrade. Besides, Aunt Lema and Ricky shared an apartment there with Carrol and her new boyfriend JR. Dad always preferred living around his sister.

With just a few weeks left in the school year, I stayed in Ms. Roberts' class. I dreaded each day. I liked staying up late and getting stoned, watching TV and playing games. The no-pot-on-school-nights-rule had long been ignored. I got high when everyone else did and that was just about every night. Consequently, I was becoming lazy, my focus in class and on assignments was diminishing and I was hell to wake up every morning. Mom would nudge me trying to stir me awake, I'd bitch and moan and ask for "five more minutes." Five minutes usually turned into thirty most mornings. I ran late a lot of days. To save time I went to sleep in my school clothes. All I had to do when I woke up was wash my face, brush my teeth, comb my hair, put my shoes on and I was ready to go. I didn't mind the wrinkled clothes. I thought they made me look cool.

My brother drove me to school those last weeks. He noticed my foul moods and tried to cheer me up. He often had a joint for us, which helped, but I'll never forget the song we made up on those early morning rides. He started it off:

"I don't want to go to work today.

I just wanna stay at home and play.

If I had it my way

I wouldn't go to work today."

Then it was my turn:

"I don't want to go to school today.

I just wanna stay at home and play.

If I had it my way

I wouldn't go to school today!"

Singing our song put a smile on my face and helped me start my days. Sadly, our bonding moments were few and far between in the years to come.

Bad Boys of Summer

Once I completed the 5th grade I was free to come and go as I pleased, stay up all night or sleep the day away if I wanted, which I oftentimes did. I spent a lot of time hanging out with Carrol and JR at Lema's, watching movies with them, stuffing my face with junk food and listening to them gossip about the family. Aunt Lema enjoyed talking shit about people, spreading rumors, all the while lifting herself up on a pedestal.

It was then that Aunt Lema and Carrol planted the seed that Robert Sutton, or his son Tommy Lynn, might be my biological father. I rejected that completely. Sam was my dad, and no one could tell me any different. "I don't know," Carrol queried. "Does Uncle Sam have pretty blond hair like yours? Nope. He's got dark hair and everybody knows dark-haired people pass on their dominant genes."

Aunt Lema added, "And Pops Sutton and Tommy sure were around a lot back then. Why do you think you momma named you after both of them?" They were pissing me off. I smiled back at them. "If that's true then why isn't Carrol fat like you, Aunt Lema?" She didn't think I was very funny.

There were a lot of kids in my age group at the Ambassador North, enough to play games of football and baseball with in the large field next to the parking lot. Or race bikes the length of the parking lot. We were rough kids, always banging into each other during games, arguing over every play, fighting to settle disagreements. I ruined all of my good clothes that summer, but had a lot of fun doing so.

I befriended a boy of mixed race named Marcus. Most of the kids there picked on him, mostly because he was different. What they failed to realize was that he had the largest selection of Nintendo games in the apartments! Being one of his friends, I could borrow them whenever I wanted! Not that we were only friends because of his games; he was fun to hang out with, too. The games were just a bonus. A sweet bonus!

We were picking teams for a game of baseball one day. Being a team captain I selected my teammates, and John, a big redheaded Irish kid, picked his team. Marcus wasn't my first choice because he sucked at baseball and most sports to tell the truth. He was my friend, though, so I selected him kind of early. John thought he was a comedian. "I knew you'd pick the spic. That's why y'all are gonna get destroyed! That little pussy spic boy plays like a sissy!" "Stop being a bully, John." I put my finger in his face. "And brush your fucking teeth before you come outside for crying out loud!" Everyone except John laughed. He wrestled me to the ground, penned me with his knees and beat the shit out of me. He was bigger, stronger and meaner than I was and I was no match for him. He left me with a black eye, busted lip and bruised ego. Marcus thanked me for standing up for him, but he obviously didn't want any piece of John. I sort of resented him after that for not fighting John, letting me get beat up in his place. I didn't let those ill-feelings prevent me from borrowing his games, though!

I was eleven going on twelve that summer and my hormones were raging. Down at the swimming pool, where I practically lived, a sixteen year old girl with long, bright blonde hair and well developed curves wore a two piece bikini. She was smoking hot, the inspiration for many of our fantasies. She knew she commanded all of the boy's attention and teased us by slowly applying suntan lotion over her body.

By then I'd grown a little more confident. I flirted with the hot blonde every chance I got. I could swim at the bottom of the long pool from one end to the other without coming up for air. She seemed interested when I demonstrated for her. When I beat the other boys in swim races, I thought she was impressed. She only giggled when I flexed for her. She said I was just a little boy. I lied and told her I'd had plenty of sex with my ex-girlfriend at my old apartments. I doubt she believed me, but she definitely loved the attention we showered her with.

She got into the pool one day. As she swam past me I boldly grabbed her butt. She shrieked and lightly smacked me on the head. "Boy, you are BAD! Stop that." I just laughed and touched it again. I said, "You know you like it." And she did. Her feigned anger was belied by her soft giggles. She attempted feeble protests, pushed my hand away the first few times, but finally conceded and let me touch her under the water. She looked around to make sure no one suspected anything. No one did. I caressed her firm bottom, legs and breasts. Curious and excited beyond my wildest imagination, I took it a step further and felt between her legs. My fingers lingered over the thin fabric of her swimsuit. She parted her leg slightly and grabbed my hand, guided it underneath and into her. I felt her body tense up, her breathing increased and she moaned lightly. I tried to withdraw my fingers because I wanted to touch her breasts again, but she quickly pushed me back down there. She was really into it. Some older people came into the pool area, and she pushed me away again. She adjusted her swimsuit, resumed her act and patted my head again. "I told you to swim along, little boy!"

My cousins Tom and Jerry stayed in touch with me periodically when they left Aransas Pass. They were then living in Vidor, Texas, and called me often to ask questions about Nintendo games. I had a knack for solving games, knew lots of secrets for advanced levels, and I shared them liberally with my cousins. Since it was summertime and they were out of school their mom Marcy agreed to let them spend a couple of weeks with me. Big mistake!

Marcy was a strict but loving mom. Tom and Jerry had curfews, weren't allowed to smoke anything, and they never swore. They even said their prayers before meals and bed! They were good kids. My mother didn't mind them staying with us because she could count on them to clean up after themselves and help her around the apartment, unlike my other cousins. Jerry actually enjoyed helping my mom with housework.

After a couple of days of my influence some of those manners began to wear off! Late at night, when the adults went to sleep, they smoked cigarettes and pot with me. It was

their first time trying either. They laughed at everything, got the munchies and acted silly with me all night.

I showed them around the apartments and we did all the normal things kids our age do, but I wanted to show them the big city. We lived about ten blocks from the Northline Mall so I took them to see it. They were nervous during the walk there, looking over their shoulders as if they wanted to return to the safety of the apartments. Their anxiety was replaced with astonishment and uncontained wonder once we arrived, though. We ran through the mall's stores, played games at the arcade and quickly spent the little money we had.

In those days, Northline Mall's security was almost non-existent. I led my cousins into a department store to a section where no one was around and shoved an action figure in my pants. They followed me out of the store to the restrooms. They were shocked at how easy it was to steal something there. They became emboldened and we returned to the same store, each of us lifting something this time and returning it to our safe spot in the restroom's garbage can. For about a week we stole from the mall and brought it all to my room, hid everything in my closet. We had clothes, video games, fake jewelry and various toys.

We would've gotten away cleanly, and we did at the mall, but Tom and Jerry tried to take their stolen stuff home with them. Marcy demanded to know where they'd gotten all that stuff. Jerry caved on us and not only told about the stealing but also about smoking as well. They weren't ever allowed to stay with Cousin Robert again!

Palm's Motel

Shortly after we left Aransas Pass, Uncle Wayne purchased the Palm's Motel down there. The buildings were pink and adjoined, forming an L-shape. Uncle Wayne and Junior's family lived in the pink house/office building in the center of the lot. Several of the rooms were occupied by family. Acquiring the motel was one of Uncle Wayne's greatest accomplishments in life. He said he could die peacefully knowing that his kids and grandkids would have something to fall back on when he was gone. Those were portentous words that reverberated through the family just a couple of months later.

While at the bar in town Uncle Wayne got into an argument with one of the regulars there. Witnesses say he hadn't had much to drink, but he was furious when he stormed out of the bar. He made it to his car and opened the driver's side door, then he collapsed right there on the street and died of a heart attack. He was buried in Corpus Christi, Brother Nash presiding over the services, and most of the family came down to pay their respects.

Junior took over at the Palm's when his dad died. It didn't take very long for the place to become a den for prostitutes and dope friends. His brothers Mike and Ronnie sold cocaine and meth out of the motel for him, when they weren't out robbing and thieving that is. Just two months after Wayne Senior died, Ronnie was arrested for armed robbery. He remains in the TDCJ as of 2012.

While we were living at the Ambassador North, Junior made many trips to Houston to score coke. Pops Sutton hooked him up with a dealer on the north side, an old ex con named Bill who ran hookers and sold dope out of his house. Sherry, who'd left Butch, had become one of Bill's girls until Pops intervened and they became romantic. They lived out of his van for over a year.

On one of his dope runs Junior asked my brother if he wanted to come down to the Palm's and make a little money. Junior said he couldn't trust Mike and Tammie to hold his dope anymore. They were strung out on it and were doing more than they sold. He needed someone he could trust to hold his dope. He wouldn't dare keep it in the office building for fear of being raided and losing the motel. Steven had just lost his job so he agreed and left with Junior.

Marina was Junior's maid at the Palm's. Junior paid her and gave her and her two kids free room and board. She was in her mid-twenties, had short black hair and was cute. My brother says it was love at first sight. Junior said Steven followed Marina around like a puppy dog while she cleaned rooms until she finally gave him the time of day. Steven moved into her room and kept Junior's dope in her freezer.

In the privacy of their room, Marina voiced her reservations about living there to my brother. She was frightened by the dope heads that came and went at all hours. She worried that she'd lose her kids in a drug raid if dope was found in her room. Mike and Tammie's kids were recently taken after a raid by the CPS (Children's Protective Services) and placed in foster homes.

We were all surprised when my brother returned home with Marina and her kids, six year old Christina and four old Christopher, but we fell in love with them in no time. Marina had lived a hard life. She fled from the east coast and her adoptive family when she was sixteen. She made it to California and lived there a few years, met a guy and had Christina. She never went into detail about her life out there, but from all that she did say, I ascertained that she was into drugs and her man was abusive. They ended up moving to Arizona where she had Christopher. He beat her up one night and she left him cold the very next day. Somehow she made her way to Aransas Pass, Texas and the Palm's Motel. She had a shy and reticent disposition that apparently made her a target for abusive men. Her adoptive grandfather, whom she said was one of Motorola's founders, sexually abused her as a kid and teenager until she finally ran away.

Marina and her kids were fun to hang out with. They all had an amazing sense of humor, in spite of the adversity they'd faced. Christina was a special needs kid with

deformed ears that made hearing difficult for her and, consequently, she had trouble speaking. She was such a sweet and happy kid, though. Chris was really shy at first, but he came around soon enough and became my little brother. We played games together like hide and seek, and we laughed and joked constantly.

My brother was as happy as I'd never known him. All at once he had a family of his own and he worked hard to provide for them. When Christina or Chris called him dad I could tell it stirred his emotions and made him proud. He had a glow about him that wasn't there before, as if his life suddenly had purpose and meaning. We were all happy for him.

A Devil in White

One night after Junior left from making a dope run I found myself in our living room with just Steven and Marina. Junior had left Steven about a gram of cocaine. He was chopping up lines on a mirror on the couch. I'd never done any coke before, or anything other than pot and inhalants and alcohol, but I wanted to. Probably because they were doing it and I didn't want to be left out. Steven refused me when I asked for a line. He said it was bad for me. I countered, "If it's bad for me why are you doing it?" "'Cause I'm a grown man, and it's good for me," he laughed. "Dad would kill me if he found out I turned you on to coke." "Yeah, Roberto," Marina winked at me. "It's nasty stuff. Not for kids for sure. Trust me, you don't want any of it."

I was persistent until I got my way. Steven caved and gave me just one line. When he handed me the straw he threatened me, "If Dad EVER finds out about this I'll beat your fucking ass!"

No way would I tell. I took the straw and sniffed the line, just as I'd seen them do. The burn was slight and my eyes got watery. My heart began to race, mouth got numb and a tingling sensation washed over me. I broke out into a sweat. The euphoric rush lasted about fifteen minutes. I talked non-stop the entire time. Marina suggested I take a shower. I did just that, then tried to relax in the living room as they finished up the rest of the coke. It was nearly two years before I did anymore coke, but I never forgot the rush of that first line.

Green Acres Trailer Park-Greens Road-Late Summer to Fall of 1991

Late one night my father chased a Mexican man around the Ambassador North with his Buck knife. He had been down at Lema's drinking with Ricky, as he was most nights.

He was on the way home when he encountered the Mexican in the hallway. The guy somehow disrespected him, and my father went after him, but the man eluded my father.

I was watching reruns of *In Living Color* when my father burst through our front door, out of breath and cursing about a "stankin wetback motherfucker." The police were banging on our door twenty minutes later. They arrested my father on the spot.

I tossed and turned that night, scared and worried that my dad would go back to prison. I was awakened by the sound of Dad's voice coming from the kitchen. He was talking to my mother and brother. I thought I was dreaming at first. Didn't he go to jail last night? Yes he did, but Gary Wilborn bailed him out in the wee hours of the morning. He was arrested under a minor public intoxication charge; nothing serious ever came of it. Well, other than our eviction notice, that is.

Gary helped us with the money to move into the Green Acres Trailer Park in Greenspoint. It's way out off of Greens Road, between the Hardy Toll Road and Aldine Westfield, an area mostly undeveloped back then. There was a brand new neighborhood with homes in the \$100,000's down by the intersection of Greens Road and Aldine Westfield, and there were signs announcing the development of another neighborhood along Greens Road, but we were surrounded by virgin pine forest at the Green Acres. Most of the residents owned their own trailers and had them wheeled into the park. There were a lot of double-wide trailers with fenced yards in the park and brand new vehicles in the driveways. But along the far left part of the park there were about ten older trailers for rent, and we settled into a nice 3 bedroom/2 bath there.

At first everything felt perfect. My parents took the master bedroom, Steven and his family shared a room and I had my very own room! I set up my stereo system, arranged a small black and white TV set with my Nintendo on a built-in desk so it faced my bed, tacked up posters on the walls and taped a "knock before entering" sign on my door. I enjoyed the freedom and privacy of my room, although Chris and Christina were probably in there more than I was while it was still my room. About a month after we moved in, Mike and Tammie showed up, and Dad made me give them my room.

I wasn't all that disappointed relinquishing my room to them. Back then I thought Mike was cool. He didn't treat me like a kid. I smoked cigarettes in front of him without fear that he'd tell my dad, he didn't mind if I rode with him and Tammie when they went places (Steven rarely let me go with him and his family; he wanted the quality alone time with them), and I always felt like Mike and I were friends. That's probably because Mike was a kid at heart and in his mind his entire life.

What really made Mike cool was that he was an aspiring tattoo artist with a tattoo gun. While we were living in the Lazy Acres in Aransas Pass, Mike did some tattoo work on my brother, Junior, Chucky, Joe Poore, and many others. I got a hold of his gun when no one was around once and put a small, crooked cross on my left forearm, a dot on my chest

and a weird fish-looking thing on my right wrist. But I wanted something better, and by better I mean bigger!

I begged my dad at the Green Acres to let Mike put a tattoo on me. Mike had already done some work on Dad and was in the middle of putting roses and banners on my mom's shoulder. My dad said he could. The tattoo Mike gave me is a hideous piece that has induced more laughter and ribbing than anything, but back then you couldn't tell me it wasn't the coolest and baddest tattoo in the world!

One afternoon I couldn't find Mike and Tammie. Mom said they took a walk through the trailer park. I finally found them in an empty trailer, acting suspicious. Tammie didn't want me knowing what they were doing and became upset with Mike when he opened the kitchen cabinet and pulled out a can of spray paint and empty bread bag. My sister pleaded with me, "Please don't tell daddy, Bubba."

I promised I wouldn't tell. Mike sprayed gold paint into the bag and inhaled it slowly. He handed the bag to my sister and she took a hit. I wanted some too. Tammie tried to object, but Mike simply "shushed" her and passed the bag to me. The high was similar to inhaling gasoline. I heard the familiar "WAH-WAH-WAH" and reality skipped and distorted. Later that evening, after the high wore off and I was back home, I got a blinding headache and threw up. Mom thought I had the flu. She gave me a warm wash rag and cold busters, and I went to sleep early.

Mike and Tammie huffed a lot of paint at the Green Acres. They liked staying up all night and sleeping all day. Dad got fed up with Mike's laziness and nonchalance about finding a job and told him and Tammie they had to go. They moved in with Aunt Lema in Cloverleaf. For a little while I had my own room again.

Back in School

My 6th grade year began at Aldine Junior High School. Aldine is renowned for being a good school district with exceptional facilities and above average teachers. Their junior high school had recently been refurbished, and a brand new football stadium was built the year before. My first day of school, I walked down the waxed floors through freshly painted hallways, shaking with excitement. I'd heard all about middle school, how you got to change classes every hour at the ringing bell, take elective classes and have your own locker. I was intrigued with the snack bar and all the good food they sold, but rarely got to eat from it. I'd always been on the free-lunch program and that didn't change at Aldine. There was freedom, independence and added responsibility in middle school, and I loved it.

When I first selected my electives I listed an art class. I thought it'd be cool to learn to draw like my brother and Mike. Then I met a girl, a pretty brunette in one of my classes,

and I had a huge crush on her. She took band class. I asked the school counselor to please change my elective. Reluctantly, he agreed. I had to first prove that I could afford an instrument because the school didn't provide them. My dad came through for me, rented me a saxophone and bought me reeds, which became costly. I could tell he was proud to be able to do this for me, offer me something, an opportunity he didn't get as a kid.

I practiced everyday, hoping to get good and charm the girl. I learned the basics in no time and could play simple tunes like "Mary Had a Lamb," and the "Itsy-Bitsy Spider." I even talked myself into the seat right next to my heart's desire in band class. When it came time to perform I did so with passion and, I thought, did a great job. My teacher gave me an A.

It was all to no avail. The day I finally gained the courage to ask her out she rejected me coldly. Up until that point she was super nice to me, talked to me all the time, laughed at my jokes and whispered secrets about other kids to me. Once she realized I liked her on a romantic level she acted like she didn't know me. She told me she liked another boy. Suddenly, my interest in the saxophone took a plunge.

One of the noticeable and intimidating things about middle school was the size of some of the boys. Obviously, the 8th graders, most of which had reached puberty, looked gigantic to me, but even some of the 6th graders were ripped, athletic and growing facial hair already. I was no longer the dominant force in gym class, one of the school's elite. I still scored mega points during dress-out in gym class because I was the only kid with tattoos!

At Aldine, I became friends with a 7th grader named Chris. He was big for his age and apparently had already reached puberty because he had a light mustache and lots of acne. We rode the bus together, but I didn't talk to him until we met on the bench in front of the principle's office. We were waiting to see the principle for separate write-ups. I'd gotten into trouble for sleeping in class; he was there for fighting a black kid, who was on a bench out in the hall. Chris was a white kid and was quiet on the bus. Not so much on the bench that day. "These fucking niggers think they can push us whites around. I'll kill that nigger, I swear!"

Chris got suspended for three days. After his suspension was over he sat next to me on the bus and we cut it up together to and from school everyday. He had lots of problems at school with black kids. He was known for using racial slurs and ostracized by many. On the bus we sat in the back and quietly made racist jokes, imitating black people by smashing our noses down and sticking our lips out, mocking their Ebonics. He absolutely hated black people, dreaded each day at school.

On the bus ride home one afternoon Chris asked me if I wanted to skip school with him the next day. He said we could intentionally miss the bus the following morning and meet up at the Hardy Toll Road, then walk back to his house. His parents would be gone and

we could chill out there and get high until school let out. His mom had a stash of some killer bud, he promised. No way could I pass that up!

Everything seemed to work out according to plan. We spent the day smoking pot, making cookies and jamming out to Metallica at his place. I walked home after school let out and my mom had a worried look when I stepped inside. "Where the hell have you been all day, boy?" "At school," I said innocently. "Bullfuckingshit!" Mom screamed at me. "The goddamn school called me earlier wondering where your lying ass was! I've been worried sick all day!" I told her everything. She promised not to tell my father, but I was in big trouble at school. My write-ups had been stacking up, there were too many trips to the principle's office for sleeping in class, failure to run in assignments, cursing a teacher out and fighting once. My mom and I sat in the principle's office as he listed my offences. He said, "Skipping school is the final straw, Robert. I should expel you. But I think there's hope for you, unlike that troublemaker you run around with. If your mother will agree and sign the proper paperwork, I'll send you to alternative school." Of course she agreed and signed me off to alternative school. She would do anything to keep me in school.

My father never found out about Drew Middle School, where alternative classes were held. Each morning I had to wake up extra early to catch a special bus to Drew, which was about twenty-five minutes away out on Little York in the heart of Acres Home. Kids from several surrounding districts were sent to Drew as a last resort. We were considered the worst of the worst. Alternative classes were held in an isolated section of Drew, with only one entrance to the rooms and no windows. It felt like being in prison in those classrooms. We weren't allowed to leave until classes were over each day. Contact with the "normal" students at Drew was strictly prohibited.

There were a few cool things about going to Drew. The teachers were really nice. With only about fifteen kids per class they could easily help us with our assignments. Once we finished our work they let us play board games, talk or even sleep if we wanted. Classes began at 7:00 a.m. and ended at 1:30 p.m., Monday-Friday, a score as far as I was concerned! Our teachers said it was very difficult to get kicked out of Drew. It took three write-ups, but they rarely wrote a kid up. If you did manage to get three write-ups, you were gone, expelled for the year. I managed to stay out of trouble while there. My dad would have killed me if I got expelled from school!

Crowded Again

Junior called my dad one night and asked if he could bring his family up to Houston to live with us. A couple of months before, he'd lost the Palm's Motel. He'd been raided by the drug task force one too many times. Sheriff Linda Thompson gave him an ultimatum: sell the place or she'd make sure it got seized. He bought a shrimp boat, a truck, several

horses and a piece of land and a trailer with the money. He thought he'd get into the shrimping business. That didn't pan out for him. He soon had to sell the boat and the horses just to feed his family. Uncle Wayne's dream went down the toilet, and Junior soon had no one in South Texas to turn to. He knew he could turn to Uncle Sam, as always.

My dad gave Junior and Bonnie my bedroom. I moved into Steven and Marina's room. My mom was forced to deal with the chaos and funk that my cousins brought with them, and she wasn't happy about it. She could manage Marina's well-behaved kids easy enough, but "Junior's little demons drive me to drinkin' ", she cried.

Junior wanted to use his truck to start a handyman business. He thought he could drive around Houston and do odd jobs for people. Steven, who'd recently been laid off from his mechanic's job, thought Junior's idea was stupid. My brother wanted to start a tree service and use Junior's truck to get it off the ground. Junior liked that idea better. They tore off the tool boxes from the truck and built wooden sides to carry larger loads of trees. They used the money Junior had left to buy a few chainsaws and tree service equipment. The business prospered and became the foundation for Pioneer Trees.

It wasn't long before the landlord at the Green Acres banged on our door. She wanted to know why we'd taken in an entire family. "Seven people is pushing my limit for a three bedroom," she told my mother. "Thirteen is insane and unacceptable. Besides, those are the baddest kids I've ever seen! They've gotta go."

My cousins had been terrorizing the trailer park, fighting with other kids and tearing up their toys. Junior took his bunch to live with his mother in Cloverleaf. We would soon follow them.

A Wasted Youth

Cloverleaf - Dead-end of Corpus Christi Street-Late 1991-1994

The streets of Cloverleaf are straight and narrow and named after Texas cities. Those stretching south begin at Interstate-10 and extend about five miles to Alderson and a patch of woods about a quarter mile wide. Just beyond these woods a gully divides Cloverleaf from Northshore, a predominantly middle class area. Technically, traveling west, Uvalde Road also separates Cloverleaf from Northshore, but most of us considered Freeport Street the western end of “Cloverdump” or “The Dump,” as we affectionately called it. Because once you cross Freeport the differences are readily apparent: there are no sidewalks, the ditches are deeper and wider and often littered with trash, there are no street lights and the stop signs are either peppered with bullet holes, tagged with graffiti or altogether missing. All of the roads heading east stretch another five miles and dead-end at another patch of woods, also about a quarter mile wide. Beyond these woods you’ll find Beltway 8 and Channelview. Back in the 1980’s and 1990’s Cloverleaf was mostly a run-down area, home to poor Whites and Hispanics.

We moved back to The Dump when I was twelve years old. Aunt Lema and Ricky were living in the back trailer of a four trailer lot at the dead-end of Corpus Christi Street, right against the woods to the east. It was a decent 3 bedroom/2 bathroom trailer, but as usual Aunt Lema had a full house. Mike, Tammie, Carrol and JR all lived with her when Junior and his bunch moved in. At that time, Aunt Lema’s health was rapidly declining. She had difficulty breathing and complained that the constant traffic was stealing her air. We’d visit several times, and my dad was concerned about his sister. Together they came up with a solution: Aunt Lema and Ricky moved into an apartment several blocks away on Hershey, Carrol and JR moved in with her family in Orange, Texas, Mike and Tammy were taken in by Cousin Nancy in Beaumont, Texas and we moved into Aunt Lema’s old trailer with Junior’s bunch, who, a couple of months later, moved into the side trailer once it became available. This way, my father reasoned, we’d be closer to family and Steven wouldn’t have to drive halfway across Houston to pick Junior up for work each morning. My brother said he was tired of “burning daylight having to put my boot in his fat ass!”

My dad, on the other hand, was a delivery driver and didn't mind waking up thirty minutes early to make the commute to Bill Dee's.

When we first moved in there were some existing trails through the woods behind our trailer, but they were mostly overgrown. Over the next couple of years my cousins and friends helped me cut miles of trails wide enough to ride bikes through back there. We built clubhouses and tree houses, hunted rabbits and birds and played war games in these and other wooded areas around Cloverleaf. I became intimately familiar with the woods of Cloverleaf, Northshore and Channelview. It was my territory. Anytime the cops, truant officers, or anyone else chased me I knew I'd be safe if I could just reach the nearest woods. That's why I preferred to either be on foot or a bike when I went out robbing and thieving.

School of Hard Knocks

I resumed the 6th grade at the old Northshore Middle School, located besides Northshore High School, just past the gully into Northshore on Freeport. My dad thought it would be good for me to go to school with more white kids. While Aldine Junior High was a decent school it was about 60% black and, although my father never knew I went to school there, Drew Middle School was easily 80% black. Northshore was considerably more diverse. I'd say it was close to 40% white, 30% Hispanic and 30% black. The majority of the black kids lived in nice apartment complexes in Northshore, while about half of the whites and Hispanics lived in the middle class neighborhoods in Northshore. The rest of us were from Cloverdump. It was pretty easy to figure out which side of the gully a kid lived on.

There was an entirely different culture at Northshore, one that I felt more comfortable in. It wasn't just that there were more whites, rather it was because there were more kids into the things I liked such as skating, riding bikes, video games, exploring nature and swimming. I remember the gully by the school flooding that first year. After school let out a bunch of us Cloverdump boys stripped to our underwear and dove right in. We barely noticed the plastic bags, beer bottles and other garbage floating by!

My first friend at Northshore was a short, stocky kid named Jose. I was at my locker that first morning, a little nervous about being in a new school, when Jose approached me wearing a wool black and white poncho, gold chain, jeans, black suede shoes and his famous smile. He thought he was smooth as silk, even if most of the chicks thought he was a creepy weirdo and most of the dudes hated his guts. Jose seemed to have the scoop on everyone. He clued me in the day we met. "You see him? That's Ricky Romero, the baddest vato in 6th grade. Check out that fine ass blonde. Her name's Tara Brown, the hottest chick in school. She likes me, but since I'm not a Prep she won't go out with me, or accept

any more notes. That's Mrs. Jones, the 6th grade counselor. Her breath smells like crap." Jose made me laugh, and I enjoyed his company those first couple months.

After school I followed Jose to his apartments in Northshore. We used to swim at the pool there and lift weights in his bedroom. He was all about exercising and eating healthy so he could play baseball, his greatest passion aside from girls. When we first met he smoked cigarettes with me, probably just to look cool, but he soon quit. He never touched weed because he said it "makes me feel stupider than I am."

Jose had over twenty girls' phone numbers, none of which wanted him to have their personal information. At his apartment and in-between exercising and playing games he prank called them. He made funny noises or tried to disguise his voice and ask them out. One number he had belonged to Allison, a cute blonde that I had a crush on. He dialed her number and handed me the phone. "Hello?" She answered. After a few seconds of nervous silence on my end she became irate. "Jose? Is that you? I know it's you! Stop calling my house, you freak!" I had a few classes with Allison and talked to her occasionally, but I would've died if she ever found out that was me on the line that day.

We had the typical cliques at Northshore: Preps, Jocks, Geeks and Nerds, Gangbangers, Rednecks, Goths and Headbangers. I guess I was mostly considered a Headbanger or Skater-type, but I liked country music and identified with some of the Rednecks. The thing is, I was very self-conscious and lacked confidence at first because of the cheap clothes I wore. All of the "cool" and "popular" kids wore name brands like Levi, Girbaux, Guess, Hilfiger and Nike. I was extremely shy in my Rustlers, a generic brand of Wranglers, and Wal Mart clothes. I desperately wanted to fit in an dress like the "popular" crowd, regardless of their clique.

Jose had a nice pair of Elise shoes that I coveted. One day after school he told me to follow him. We walked to the Academy Sports and Outdoors store on Uvalde. We made our way to the shoe section and located the same style of Elise he wore. He said to wait until no one was watching and switch shoes, then leave the ones I had worn into the store inside the shoebox. I did just as he instructed and we casually walked around, acting normal, then left the store. Piece of cake.

I thought I was The Shit in my new shoes! I showed them off to my cousins, who snitched on me to my mom. She demanded to know where I got them. I lied and told her my girlfriend's mom took us shopping and bought them for me. Mom never checked my story.

Sadly, I thought the clothes I wore would enhance my character and status amongst my peers, but they never did. I became obsessed with clothes and shoes. From the time I stole the shoes with Jose forward, I either stole my clothes and shoes or bought them with money made from working or my illegal activities. More often than not it was the latter. I learned a variety of techniques to steal from clothing stores and malls and became quite

proficient at it. My vanity and the ignorance that stemmed from it directly influenced my subsequent criminal lifestyle and I soon spiraled out of control.

Once the final bell rang and classes let out for the day all of the cool kids from both the middle and high schools crossed Freeport and the gully to Pac's #2 corner store on Alderson, not to be confused with Pac's #1 on Freeport and Corpus Christi Street. The parking lot and sidewalk by the front entrance and pay phones were crowded with kids in backpacks, lounging around and trying to act cool by smoking cigarettes, sometimes pot. Inside the store a couple of middle aged Arab men tried to keep an eye on the kids roaming the aisles and hanging out by the arcades.

Not long after I began school at Northshore I found myself amongst the crowd of youngsters watching a couple of high school kids play the game Street Fighter II. I'd never seen the game before and was utterly captivated by the awesome graphics and sound effects of each character as they fought. One of the kids playing, a sixteen year old named Juan Vargas, was destroying every kid who challenged him. I had a couple of quarters in my pocket and placed one on the screen – as I'd saw others do – to signify that I wanted to play next. I selected the green monster character, Blankk, because I thought he looked mean enough to give me a shot against Juan, but Juan quickly dispatched a man with a flurry of kicks, punches and “special moves” by his fighter, Chun Li, a wicked female character whose battle cry I can still hear today.

“You’ve gotta learn how to use each fighter and perform their special moves,” Juan later told me. “Be there early in the morning when it’s not so crowded and I’ll teach you.”

Not only was I there about an hour before school the next morning, I practically lived at Pac's #2 the rest of my 6th grade year. My mom was surprised at how easy it was to wake me up for school for awhile there, after struggling with me so much the previous year. I would hurry to get ready each morning, jump on my bike and jet through Cloverdump to get to Pac's #2. My life seemed to revolve around Street Fighter II.

No sooner did I master Street Fighter II and supplant Juan as the kid to beat they installed a new arcade, Mortal Kombat. It was another action-packed fighting game, but with better graphics and sick end-of-match finishing moves called “fatalities.” Once you had your opponent's energy bar depleted a voice rang out, “Finish Him!” If you performed the correct combination code with the joystick and buttons your character would engage in its fatality, rip your opponent's heart out, blast his head off with electricity or some other kill move that splashed blood and guts and organs everywhere, drawing “oohs” and “aahs” from the spectators. I mastered Mortal Kombat as well and dominated the completion at Pac's # II.

I was playing Mortal Kombat at Pac's #II the day I met Justin Lee, a kid about my age yet slightly shorter and a little stockier than me, with curly brown hair. He was in the 7th grade and I'd seen him around school but never spoke to him. Incidentally, his older brother Shane was in the 6th grade with me, and we had a few classes together. Shane was an extraordinarily tall kid who later became a star basketball for Northshore High School, but he had a learning disability and, despite being older than Justin, he was a year behind him. While Shane was shy and introverted, Justin was outgoing and extroverted and he and I hit it off from the jump. He invited me to his house, a white house off Victoria in Cloverleaf where James Terry used to live before he moved to Eagle Pass. I met his parents and younger sister Amy. As soon as Amy saw me she said, "You're friends with Jose, right?"

"Yeah, but he moved."

"Good! He's a nasty boy. Thinks he's fine, but he's a puke and needs to learn what no means!"

I spent most of the rest of my 6th grade year hanging out with Justin. If we weren't at one of the Pac's playing games we went swimming in one of the apartment complexes in Northshore public pool, or we rode bikes or his go-cart, which he blew the engine to after riding it into the gully. Justin also helped me with some of the trails behind my place. Most weekends he either spent the night with me or I slept over at his house. He liked staying with me because we could get away with more, like smoking pot and cigarettes. His parents would've grounded him for life if they would've caught him getting stoned!

We also frequented the local skating rink, called Skatetown USA, almost every weekend. I'd gone there once before with Jose, but he got beat up by Ricky Romero and didn't want to show his face there again. You couldn't keep Justin and me away, though. We were a couple of show-offs out on the skating floor, racing each other and doing tricks in the competitions. I had a girlfriend then named Shelly Powell who lived in the apartments behind Justin's house. Shelly was Justin's chick the year before, but he was totally cool with me being with her since he was with Angela Garza. We used to take our chicks to the skating rink so they could cheer us on and slow skate with us during "couples only." Afterwards, we'd see how far we could get with them outside in the parking lot.

The reactions I got from the crowd at Skatetown when I won a competition or did a full-tuck back flip on skates went straight to my head. Of course one of my most embarrassing moments back then was when I was first perfecting that flip and busted my ass, sliding right into a couple of girls from the high school! But I was fast, athletic and versatile, and I thought I was the coolest motherfucker on wheels! I'm sure I was annoying to a lot of the kids there, but you couldn't tell me that then!

One afternoon I showed up at Justin's and found him, Amy, Shane and Shannon Becker hanging out on his front porch, listening to the radio. Shannon was James Terry's niece and she lived with James, her dad and step-mom and older sister Debbie. I'd known them for about a year. I used to mess around with Debbie while Shannon watched out for us and tried to control her giggles. Shannon was around my age with long, brown hair and a pretty face, but she never caught my eye until that day on Justin's porch. Probably because she wore glasses. I was pretty vain back then. But at Justin's that afternoon Shannon sang along to "Under the Bridge" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers – the first I'd heard of them – and I was charmed by her beauty and sweet voice. She wore tight shorts and when she got up to leave Justin said, "Damn, that's one fine ass right there." I agreed and said as much, and Amy told Shannon what we'd said, the little snot!

The next afternoon at Justin's Amy ran up to me with excitement. "Do you like Shannon?"

"Huh?" She caught me off guard and I was suddenly nervous.

"Do you like her? 'Cause she likes you and you two would be cute together!"

I'd broken up with Shelly weeks before when Justin said he caught her and her brother Robert Powell kissing. I asked Shelly if it was true and she became hostile with me so I took that as a yes. So, I was single and, hell yeah, I wanted to hook up with Shannon. Amy arranged everything, sitting us on the couch and even placing our hands together because "y'all are obviously too shy to do it on your own!"

It didn't last a week between Shannon and me. We'd set it up that weekend so Shannon would be Amy's sleepover guest and I'd be Justin's. Justin's parents went out with friends and we were left to our own devices. Justin and I had smoked some pot and then he and Shannon started drinking his dad's beer. I rarely drank alcohol and didn't touch any that night. Things soon got out of hand. Justin started getting all touchy-feely with Shannon, singing songs to her and acting like an idiot. I got pissed off and wrestled him to the floor, but I could tell he was drunk and didn't realize how mad I was at him because he kept laughing hysterically. He continued to flirt with Shannon and, from my vantage point, she didn't try to stop him or discourage him in the least.

I left the room and Amy followed me. Amy was a pretty girl, but she was almost two years younger than me, and besides, I had a crush on Shannon. That night I discovered that Amy had a secret crush on me, though. She knew I was upset about her brother and Shannon and tried to cheer me up. The next thing I knew we were on her bed kissing. The door opened and there stood Shannon. Her mouth fell open and she ran out of the house and walked home. I tried to catch up to her and explain myself, but she shook me off. Our short fling was officially over.

Years later, after Shannon blossomed into a straight knock-out, I tried again to hook up with her. She said I blew my chance cheating on her and really wasn't trying to hear my side of things. She sure liked to tease me, though, shaking her fine ass and flirting

with me when I came around without giving me any action! I really screwed any chance I might've had with her by telling her I'm the one that made up the infamous song about her after our break-up: "Shannon Becker/Black&Decker/Give her a quarter and she'll suck your pecker!"

One night, while spending the night at Justin's, we wanted to go to Pac's #1 and play video games, but we had no money. We'd blow his allowance the previous day. His parents were asleep and he said, "My dad got paid yesterday and has a fat roll of cash. I think I can sneak in their room and swipe us a five spot."

He was gone about five minutes before returning with the money. We ran over to Pac's #1 and blew the money on drinks and games. On the walk back to his place, as we were still racing with adrenaline, he said he thought he could snag us another five dollar bill. That turned into almost fifty dollars, which we blew on games and snacks. It was almost daylight before we finally crashed out, delirious from a wild night out.

The following morning I woke to Justin's dad screaming. He burst into the room and gave us both a stern talking to. Thankfully, he wasn't the type to spank his children or their friends. Justin cried and confessed to everything. His dad was upset, but he finally hugged him after lecturing us both on the wrongness of stealing. I was even pulled into the hugging. Surprisingly, Justin's dad took us out to eat for breakfast and gave us both a five dollar bill to play games!

Justin was a good kid with awesome parents, especially his hot, blonde mother who visited me in many of my fantasies back then. They wisely forbade him from hanging out with me about six months into our friendship. We'd been caught skipping school together and that was the final straw that broke the camel's back.

Eugene Enright

One of my best friends in life was first my enemy. Eugene Enright, a short wiry dude with long brown hair, was a few months older than me and we went to Northshore together. I was in-between classes when Eugene and a tall skinny kid named Jacob approached me in the hallway. Eugene snarled and pointed a finger at me. "Are you Robert Pruett?"

"Who's asking?" I asked.

"I am, motherfucker!" Eugene might've been small, but he was a fighter and pretty ferocious. "Nicole said you called her a bitch."

Now this was making sense, I remember thinking. "Nicole from math? Yeah, she is a fucking bitch."

"You think you're tough, dude?" Eugene seemed ready to swing, but I wasn't intimidated. "That's Ricky Romero's chick. Let him find out about this and he'll beat the fuck out of you!"

"Fuck you and Ricky Romero, man. Y'all don't scare me!"

The bell rang and he promised me it wasn't over. Eugene swears up and down that the hallway confrontation wasn't as big a deal as I made it out to be and that he never made the Ricky Romero comment. He says he only jammed me up because Nicole used to let him finger bang her, that he knew she was a bitch and couldn't stand her himself. I remember what I remember.

There was tension and animosity between Eugene and I the rest of the 6th grade year. We almost fought once after Saturday detention because he kept cutting a mad dog stare at me and I flipped him off. His ride was waiting on him when they let us out and, again, he vowed to, "deal" with me later.

I had a friend everyone called Fat Thomas, a huge kid from high school that I met at Pac's #2. During the early part of the summer of 1992, after Justin wasn't allowed to hang out with me anymore, I spent a lot of time with Fat Thomas at the Gentry apartments, just down the road from Pac's #2 on Alderson. He lived there with his hippy mom and their Shar pei dog. We used to get high listening to Pink Floyd with a strobe light on.

It was at Fat Thomas' apartments that summer that I ran into Eugene and Rusty, a blond kid from the 7th grade who was then Eugene's best friend. Rusty also lived at the Gentry, and together they came racing into the parking lot on bikes. I thought Eugene and I would surely fight then, but we all started talking about the situation and the next thing I know we're all friends. We all spent the night at Rusty's apartment with his sister and her high school friend – two smoking hot chicks that kept my tongue tied in knots all night long. I got so stoned that I was the first one to fall asleep and the boys rubbed mustard and ketchup all over me. I awoke to the chicks laughing and was incredibly embarrassed. That's the price I had to pay for falling asleep early, though. Believe me, everyone of those motherfuckers got it worse when they fell asleep first on me!

The four of us hung out the rest of the summer. Although he was a jovial spirit and a natural comedian, a genuine joy to hang out with, Fat Thomas was a huge dork in that he loved the role plying game Dungeons n' Dragons. He talked us into starting a game with him. We drew up character sheets and started an adventure plying by the rules, but in no time our stoned asses were playing ad-lib and the game turned to chaos. Even with all the pot we smoked during sessions the game got boring to us (except for Fat Thomas; he could've played all day everyday) and we hit the streets of Cloverdump and Northshore on our bikes.

Eventually, we started stealing together. It began with us having the munchies and us stealing snacks from stores up and down Freeport. Then we stole clothes together from TJ Fashion on Uvalde as well as the surf and skate shop on Woodforest. We also hit a smoke shop called Pepper Joe's one night, using an axe to burst through the side and we ran off with pipes and bongs and Triple Beam scales. We almost got caught when Fat Thomas got stuck between the boards where we entered, though! Just as we yanked him

out a cop car passed. No doubt the cop would've seen us had we not disappeared into the woods.

Eugene took us to his house on Force Street. His place was usually jam-packed with teenagers and young adults. His brother, Jessie "Pegleg" Young (they had different dads, same mom), was largely responsible for that. Jessie was about eight years older than us, and when he was sixteen lost his leg in a motorcycle accident off Ridlin in Channelview. Afterwards, Jessie became one of the most popular dudes on the east side. Everywhere he went people were waving and hollering at him, asking after him. I was surprised by how many people he knew. He also sold pot out of their place and people were always in and out for that.

Eugene's sisters are another reason they kept full house. They were in high school and very popular. Tabitha was in the twelfth grade. She had short black hair and sorta acted as a mother figure to Eugene because their mom was rarely around. Coleen was a year behind Tabitha, she had long blonde hair and both girls were very good looking, thus, they kept lots of boys around. Tabitha moved to Mississippi after she got married in early 1993 so I never really got to know her. Coleen was rarely home, but I got to know her pretty well over the years, and I had a huge crush on her.

Eugene could pretty much come and go as he pleased without answering to anyone. Gene, his mom, and her boyfriend "Boo" (Eugene never knew his real father) were hooked on crack when I first met him, and she never brought it home in front of her kids but everyone knew. While Eugene enjoyed his freedom, I could tell it bothered him that his mom neglected him so much, and he was worried about her. I remember one time, not long after we met, when Gene was home and in her room. Eugene and I were there and about to hit the streets. He said he needed to check in with his mom first. I thought that was odd because he never needed her permission before. It was after midnight, but she didn't object.

Eugene became a brother to me, as did Jessie. His mom became the best of friends with my parents. We all grew to love each other like family, helping each other and even living with each other during hard times. While Eugene, Rusty and I were as tight as a frog's pussy over the years, Fat Thomas broke away from the group around the start of the new school year in 1992. We were all briefly reunited during the Christmas break that year, and I fondly recall the four of us being on top of the high school gym on New Year's Eve as the clock ticked towards midnight. We were stoned and had started drinking 40-ounces of malt liquor an old bum bought for us. Right at the stroke of New Year's 1993, we slammed our beers and launched the bottles out onto the street. We then made a pact: no matter what we would all meet back up on the top of that gym at midnight on New Year's ten years later. We made the pact because we were sad we'd be losing Fat Thomas in mere days. Ten years later, at the stroke of midnight, I thought about my old friends and wondered where they were, how they'd been doing, if they were also thinking of me

and our pact. I wondered then and now if any of them even knew I couldn't keep my end of the deal because I was on death row...

Trouble at School

Despite being at Northshore longer than any other school, I can't recall a single teacher's name, nor the principal's name, even after setting records for appearances in his office for getting into trouble. This is likely because about halfway through the 6th grade I was constantly high and my attention span and desire to be at school rapidly diminished. At first I was enthused about each day, getting to Pac's #2 as fast as I could and then getting over to school. Gradually, my interest in academics faded and I fell behind my classes, barely skating through the 6th grade.

I told myself I'd do better at the start of the 7th grade, but things only got worse. I'd started getting into trouble in the 6th grade, being sent to the principal's office for disciplinary write-ups such as sleeping in class, cutting up and back talking the teachers, passing notes to girls, failing to complete assignments and homework. It escalated in the 7th grade. The principal tried everything to get me in line. He paddled me, gave me Saturday detention, sent me down the road to SAGD (Special Assignment and Guidance Center) for seven and fourteen day stretches, and suspended me regularly. I was even sent to a special counselor, a child psychologist, by court order. Nothing seemed to work. I kept telling myself I'd straighten up, buckle down and get my act together, but I continued to spiral out of control all throughout middle school. All I cared about was staying stoned, flirting with girls, making money and living the fast life. I thought I could pull out of that lifestyle when I really wanted to, but I never made a sustainable effort. "Tomorrow" never came for me. I started skipping school regularly. Jose and I skipped once, but he was paranoid all day and afraid his dad would find out so he never did it again. Justin and I skipped several times until his dad found out and ended our relationship. Mostly, it was Eugene, Rusty and I, but we had accomplices like Jeremy Walker and Aaron, both high schoolers, and various others. We spent the days in the woods behind Pac's # 2, in the dugouts at the baseball diamond, or in abandoned houses and buildings. We caught up on sleep. We got high and screwed around until school let out and we could hit the streets without fear of truant officers and cops.

My mom thought she knew how to stop me from skipping school. She'd drop me off at the front entrance and watch me walk in. She should've drove around to the back entrance to make sure I didn't slip from it, which I often did. In fact, I learned that second period was the period that the attendance sheet was reviewed by the principal. As long as you were on it, you were counted present for the day. I used to go first and second periods, then sneak out the back and skip the rest of the day.

My mom usually got the phone call at home when I'd get in trouble at school. She would yell at me and plead with me to stay out of trouble and do right in school, and I would always promise her I'd do better. When I kept getting sent home on suspension she would

threaten me, tell me she was telling my dad, but she never did. I learned to manipulate her, to convince her not to tell my dad. She'd ground me, but such punishments were never enforced. I'd get her high and she'd forget all about it, then I'd leave the house and hit the streets. She had no clue how to control me, and by keeping my bad behavior from my dad I had no discipline growing up. I know she only kept things from dad because she didn't want him to hit me, but that's probably what I needed: a boot in my ass. I definitely needed structure and discipline. All kids do.

The Fast Life

Eugene, Rusty and I kicked off a crime spree that went far beyond candy and clothes sometime toward the end of 1992. It began with bikes. Eugene had a blue Elf, an expensive freestyle bike, while Rusty and I had cheap BMXs. We roamed the neighborhoods of Northshore looking for upgrades. We stole GTs, Redliners, Mongooses and any decent bicycle we could get our hands on. We stored them all in Eugene's garage where we interchanged parts and worked on them, painting them and creating hybrids so no one would catch us on their bikes. Over the years we always had the best bikes and accessories for them. The ones we didn't keep we sold.

Being potheads we smoked a lot of weed. Weed wasn't free, and money we didn't always have, so we stole from dope dealers. Ernesto Vargas Senior (Juan's dad) ran a tire shop on Corpus Christi Street. I stopped by once to get a flat on my bike fixed and smelled pot. I struck up a conversation with Ernesto and found me an awesome pot connection. He sold me half ounces for twenty-five dollars, full ounces for forty bucks, and the weed was always excellent quality. After we moved to Cloverleaf it was through people like Ernesto that I scored pot for my family from. I usually got better deals than James Terry ever gave us.

Eugene, Rusty and Aaron were skipping school with me one day and we didn't have any pot. I thought I could get a front from Ernesto so we rode over to his shop. I walked into his office and it was empty. I waited a few minutes for him to show up before growing bold and stealing a ziploc bag from the desk where he kept his stash. I stuffed it down my pants and hit the streets with my friends.

We made it to a familiar patch of woods and got stoned. It was some killer lime green bud. For some reason we decided to cross the street and ride into another patch of woods. As soon as we got onto the streets Ernesto skidded to a halt in front of us in his truck with some of his friends. I shit bricks when he jumped out and fired a handgun into the sky. All my friends raced off without me as Ernesto pinned me against the truck and searched me, finding his weed. "What the hell is wrong with you, pinche pendejo? I treat you good and you chingale me?"

“I’m sorry, man! I was gonna pay you back!”

“Don’t bullshit with me! I catch you around my shop again and I cut your cajones off, comprende?”

“Yeah, man. It’s cool.”

I became good friends with both of Ernesto’s sons, Juan and Ernesto Jr., and he forgave me for stealing from him, but he had me and my friends terrified that day. Not scared enough to stop stealing, though. We stole pot from James Terry for about a year after that. Having lived with him before, I knew how to get into his pad easily. Once he finally figured out it was me, he confronted me.

“Boy, you’re like my own son, my flesh and blood. You ask me and I’ll give you the shirt off my damn back. To steal from me? Breaks my heart.” He was very emotional and I felt bad. Eugene and I stole a badass chainsaw not long after that and gave it to him. He got us stoned and tried to give us money for it, but we wouldn’t accept it.

The three of us stole from vehicles all over Northshore and Channelview. We’d wait until late at night and then hit Woodforest and all of the neighborhoods along it, sneaking up to vehicles to check if they were unlocked. These were the days before car alarms were popular and some of these vehicles were unlocked. We stole a variety of items like tools, purses, stereos, speakers or anything we deemed valuable. We robbed hundreds of vehicles over the span of just a few months, sometimes hitting the same vehicles more than once. We were never caught.

I first met Ruben and his brothers when Aunt Lema still lived in the back trailer on Corpus Christi Street and we were just visiting. Ruben Barrios lived with his brothers and mom in a trailer a street over from me, right next to the house owned by his grandparents. Billy Wayne, Troy and I ran them out of the woods at the dead-end of their block, being dumbass bullies. Ruben was about my age, the oldest of his siblings, and as soon as we drove them out to the street I felt bad for being a bully and settled my cousin down. We all became friends right then.

The thing is, I had no compunction when it came to stealing. Very few were safe from me. Ruben and his family didn’t command my loyalty, and so we robbed his grandfather’s garage one night and toted a couple of tool boxes down to the Mexican apartments on Nancy Rose to a dope dealer I knew. He traded us pot and cash on the spot. This was the first business we done with the dude and he was a solid fence for stolen good for years to come.

Rusty and I were out prowling one night when we ran into Mindy and her mom. Mindy was Shane Lee’s girlfriend and her mom was a really sweet woman who let Mindy and her friends hang out at their place and pretty much do what they wanted. Back when I was best friends with Justin we spent a lot of weekends getting stoned at Mindy’s, and her mom rented movies and bought pizza for us with her government check, which was her only income. When Rusty and I ran into them it had been a while since I’d seen them and

they were excited to see me. They invited us over to hang out and watch movies with them, but we had business to take care of and said we'd try to drop by later.

We did drop by later that night. Mindy let us in. Everyone but she and Shane were asleep. We hung out with them and started a movie, but they left the room to get it on, leaving us alone. I didn't have any ill-intentions at first, but Rusty pointed out Mindy's mom's purse on the kitchen table. We waited for Shane and Mindy to fall asleep and stole all of the cash from the purse, about \$350. We blew the money within twenty-four hours.

Several days later I saw Mindy and Mom walking along Freeport. They called me every lowlife name in the book. I feigned ignorance, denying their allegations. Mindy's mom said they might get kicked out of their trailer and they had to beg for food and it was all my fault.

I felt bad about what I'd done, but I was caught up in the lifestyle and stayed too high to change my ways. I've hurt many people in life, done so many terrible things that I regret, often to people like Mindy's mom who only ever tried to help me; people who loved and cared about me. I was a selfish kid who didn't really stop to think about the people I was hurting with my crimes.

Another instance of my self-centeredness occurred earlier in our spree. It was December 1992. I remember this because the trailers we hit across from James Terry's house all had Christmas trees and decorations. One of the trailers belonged to a single mother and her three small kids. They had a small Christmas tree set up and presents under it. We stole their only TV set, a small color set, and we got away with about fifty dollars in food stamps. We also opened all of the gifts then left them there because they were only clothes for the kids. We never gave this or any our other heartless crimes much thought. All we cared about was money and feeding our addictions.

We hit Northshore Middle School for the first time when I was in the 7th grade. It was an older school and we easily gained access to the buildings by simply jamming a flathead screwdriver into the keyholes and turning. We stole a bunch of instruments from the band room and sold them for drugs. We also hit the computer room. Both areas were subsequently chained and huge padlocks kept us out.

Before long we started burglarizing houses and buildings all over Northshore and Channelview. We concentrated on the homes along the gully, jumping fences and gaining entry to places then we'd haul our loot into the nearby woods. That same gully morphs into a concrete drainage ditch at Beltway 8 and runs right through Channelview. There are nice, middle class houses all along it, and over the next few years we must've robbed hundreds of them along that ditch and throughout the surrounding neighborhoods.

The plan was simple and invariable. We looked for homes without alarms and without anyone home. One of us would knock on the front door or ring the bell. If the door is answered you simply ask for a girl, someone we knew from school. If no one answers after a few normal knocks or rings, then we'd pound on the door loud and hard just to be safe.

Once, before we took the precaution of pounding on doors, we broke into a house in Northshore. We must've been in there ten minutes before all the hell broke loose. I was making a sandwich and helping myself to their icebox when I heard a blood curdling scream, followed by Eugene shouting, "Get out! Get the fuck out! Someone's home!"

We flew out the back door and over the fence, into the woods. Eugene calmed down and told us what happened. He was making his way from room to room, as we normally did, when he walked into the master bedroom. The bed was unmade and looked inviting after a long night out on the streets, so he dove into it without turning the light on. An old man was sleeping in it and grabbed Eugene by the arm! They both screamed and Eugene twisted free. From that point on we decided to make sure no one was home before busting into a place!

No matter who I was out burglarizing with, I was usually the first one in. When we first started burgling places no one wanted to be the first one in for fear of someone being inside. So I did it. After the first time of being the first in I let them know that whoever was the first one in a house, the house belonged to him. He had the first pick of rooms and whatever he wanted. I'd bust out a window and then open a door to let them in, then I'd make it clear which room belonged to me. The thrill of being the first one in a house was electrifying and highly addictive.

I was outside chopping wood one afternoon with Troy and suddenly sky went dark and a light rain began to fall. We heard a rumbling in the distance. Dropping the hammer and wedge, we ran inside for cover. Shortly thereafter, the electricity went out. We braced ourselves as a strong wind shook our trailer violently.

After the power came back on a few hours later we heard on the news that three monster tornados ripped through Channelview. The following day, after the storms had passed and it was safe, Troy and I went to inspect the damage. We ran through the woods and crossed Beltway 8, then followed the open field with the main power lines to Sterling Green. We arrived to find most of the affluent neighborhood destroyed. Many of the homes were missing roofs, trees were strewn everywhere and planted into the sides of houses and on top of cars and the streets were vacant. A yellow police tape ran along the former fence line and there were police cars roaming the streets to deter looters, but there was no way they could watch the entire area.

Troy and I hit the woods until the coast seemed clear. We ducked under the yellow tape and entered a two story home through a broken window. The place was largely unaffected by the tornados, but the owners were probably forced to evacuate with everyone else in Sterling Green. We searched the home for anything valuable and small enough to fit into the pillow cases we'd removed from a bedroom. We stole video games, some cameras, a VCR and various other items. Then we jetted back home with our loot.

Troy's siblings saw us return. They were on us like flies on sugar, trying to see what all we had. I didn't want any of them snitching on us to the grown-ups, as Tonya and

Rebecca were prone to do, so I gathered them at the clubhouse in the woods and laid out the plan. Everything that Troy and I already had was ours, so hands off. But, if they came back with us and helped haul stuff back to the safety of our clubhouse everyone would get a piece of the pie. They happily agreed.

Over the next few days we all walked the twenty minute journey over to Sterling Green and looted the area, carefully toting our stolen goods back to our clubhouse. Everyone kept a few items for themselves and I fenced the rest of the stuff off for close to \$1,000. I gave each of them \$100, which they were satisfied with, and I pocketed the rest.

She'll Just Write a Check

An older white lady named Ann owned the four trailer lot at the dead-end of Corpus Christi Street and her thirty-something son, Dan, lived in the middle trailer with his black wife, Katrina. Dan was very reserved, rarely speaking to anyone over the years that I knew him. Katrina was a sweet woman who was severely cognitively inhibited, as I discovered that first year. She just didn't process things and couldn't hold her end of a conversation. She'd just nod as you talked to her and smile, adding a few words occasionally.

One afternoon Junior's kids came running up to me with pizza in their hands and on their clothes, rubbing it in my hungry face. "Nah, Nah, Naa, Nah! We got pizza and you don't got nothing! Ha-ha, ha, ha-ha!"

Just before I could pin Troy to the ground he jammed his pizza down his throat and squeezed his eyes closed. A knee grinding into his stomach brought some of it back up. "Where'd y'all get the pizza?"

They told me they'd been hanging out with Katrina and she bought it for them. Troy told me to let him up and he'd ask her to give me some. I followed them to the middle trailer, but Katrina didn't have any leftovers. Tonya asked, "Katarina, can you order another pizza for our Cousin Robert?"

"Yes," Katrina smiled. "I can write a check."

That's how it all began. Katrina ended up writing a check for several more pizzas and drinks for our entire family. She simply sat in our living room smiling as we all scarfed the pizzas. I sat next to Junior and whispered in his ear. "Dude, this lady is a space case. She has no clue about anything. Whatever your kids ask of her she gives them. I don't think she understands that she's spending money when she writes a check. Just look at her."

Junior and I devised a plan. He spoke sweet to Katrina and asked her if she wanted to go to the supermarket and write a check for some steaks and his wife Bonnie would cook them up for everyone that night. Katrina just smiled and nodded her head in agreement. She rode to the Fiesta on 1-10 with us and we wound up loading down a grocery cart with over \$300 worth of groceries, including a pager for me, which she wrote a check for. Simple as that.

That night Junior and I schemed further, while Bonnie listened with a disapproving frown. She said she wanted no part in it. Bonnie worked at a Baskin Robbins ice cream shop in Beaumont and made the ninety mile commute six days a week. The next day Junior asked Katrina if she wanted to go for a ride and go shopping with us in Beaumont. Of course she smiled and agreed. We made sure she brought her handy check book.

After we dropped Bonnie off at work we hit the mall. Toys-R-Us was the first store we hit. Junior's badass little kids ran around the store as if they'd won an unlimited shopping spree, bringing toy after toy up to the counter. I knew that wasn't going to fly. Junior and I tried to settle them down, but they were bouncing around like piss ants at a picnic. After it was all said and done the clerk rang up a bill for over \$800 worth of stuff! Katrina happily wrote the check, but the dubious clerk took it to her manager and returned apologizing, saying they couldn't accept an out of town check.

We left the store and Junior gathered his kids by a restroom. He smacked them around some and regained some semblance of control. We'd try another store, he said, but this time it was one item a piece and they had to bring it to Junior and I for approval. Nothing too expensive. That day all of the kids ended up with about \$100 dollars worth of toys each, I got a couple hundred in video games and Junior got a tailored suit from the Men's Wearhouse for \$400! Katrina smiled the entire day, happily writing checks.

About a week later I overheard Dan yelling at Katrina. He forbade her from leaving their trailer while he was at work from that point forward. He'd been driving a relatively nice car, but not long after the hot check spree he had to trade it in for an older model. He never once mentioned anything to anyone. I'm not sure he knew exactly what happened.

Joseph Day

When I first met Eugene's family on Force Street, Joseph Day was living with them. Joe, or Joe Daddy as Jessie called him, was tall and slim with long, curly brown hair, and he was a few years older than me. Everyone loved Joey. He was the pretty boy type, yet he was street savvy and tough as nails. The thing is, Joe didn't have to live in the Dump. His mom and step-dad owned a badass two story house in Sterling Green with a swimming pool in the backyard. Soon after I met him I was at his mom's place with him and I asked him why he didn't just live at home. All he ever said about it was, "I love my mom, but I can't stand it here. End of story."

For about six months or so after I met them, Jessie and Joe were always together. "Joe Daddy's my little brother. He goes with me, period," was what Jessie told anyone with reservations about taking a kid along with them. Jessie sold pot and kept traffic at their place and people were constantly taking them out somewhere. They went to Mardi Gras-

Galveston and returned with hickies and hella beads; they were always going to parties and bars together, returning with wild stories; they worked with Fred Zabac, an older Arab dude who ran a pressure washing business, and he took them to strip clubs where they chilled in VIP sections and got wasted. Eugene and I often tried to tag along when they went out, and we were always rejected. If you seen one you, knew the other was around somewhere. That is until Jessie started seeing his ex-girlfriend, Cricket. Around that time Joe started running with me, Rusty and Eugene. We'd hop on our bikes and hit the streets. We had loads of fun trying to wreck each other, catching each other off guard or just overpowering one another on bikes. Like Kelso from That 70's Show said, "It's fun seeing your friends get hurt." We were always bruised and banged up.

Joe also went thieving with us. He was actually the only one I've ever gone stealing with that dared enter a house first with me. He wasn't cool with giving me my pick of rooms. He also knew dope dealers and fences that we didn't and hooked us up with them.

Before long Joe was living with me. My parents loved him, called him son and he called them "Mom" and "Dad," as Eugene and many of my friends did. He pulled his own weight, working with my brother or Fred Zabac (or out stealing with me) and gave my dad money. As with Eugene, Joey was like a brother to me. Jessie joked after he found out Joey was living with us, "Hey, you stole my Joe Daddy!"

It was Joe who got me a job with Fred Zabac. Fred shown up to pick up Jessie and Joe for work. They were going to pressure wash some Hostess Twinkie trucks, and Joe asked Fred if he could use another hand. Jessie protested at first, acting like he'd have to watch me and Eugene, who was already on board to go with them, but Joe intervened and assured them I'd be cool, that I could handle my own. We spent the day getting soaked as we cleaned the Twinkie trucks and got stoned on some grade A Arab bud as we munched on pastries.

Joe and I became two of Fred's favorite workers. When he just needed two hands he always looked for us first. It was cool riding with Fred in his brand new Chevy step-side truck, smoking his herb and occasionally eating his mom's delicious Arab dishes. Once, we pressured washed Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon's house in Olympia, a rich neighborhood just south of Houston. Unfortunately, the then Houston Oilers' star wasn't there and Joe and I never got to meet him, but Fred said we weren't missing nothing. He said, "That fuckin nigger makes a Jew look generous! He busted my balls on this job!"

Fred was one to talk about generosity. He was tight with his money. He'd try and pay us with pot, or he'd string us along for several days without giving us anything except promises. My dad asked me how much I made one night and when I told him I hadn't been paid yet he looked upset. I said I'd get paid the next night, as Fred promised. When Fred dropped us off the following night with more excuses my dad pulled a knife on him. My father told him he'd pay me right then. Fred had lost the color in his face. "C'mon, Sambo! You ain't gotta be like that, man. See, I can pay little Robert now."

Fred paid me on the spot. Problem was, he wouldn't let me work with him again. Thanks, Dad!

Pioneer Tree Service

The tree business became our primary source of income through the 1990's. At first Junior helped my brother build the business up using his truck and money. Together they came up with names like "Pruett's and McLain's Trees" and "Po Boys Tree Service," but my brother came up with "Pioneer Tree Service" and it became his company, ultimately.

When we first started the tree service it was Steven, Junior, Mike and sometimes John who worked, but my dad worked with them from time to time. Junior's sons and my friends also helped us occasionally. I have many fond memories of working with my family and friends in the tree service. When I close my eyes I can still see my brother John – before he got too fat – up in a tree, yelling down instructions to the ground hands, systemically brining a tree down piece-by-piece. I can still see Junior in his cut off shorts and long sleeved button down shirt holding my brother's rope because, "Someone's gotta hold the fucking rope, smart ass!" Yeah, but that's all his lazy ass EVER did! I remember rolling logs and hauling limbs to the truck and trailer, unloading and loading them. I can still smell freshly cut pine and oak trees mixed with chainsaw smoke and oil gas. I can still hear the buzzing of saws or a tree cracking as it falls. It was backbreaking work, but we had fun doing it.

I was a hard worker, an aspiring climber myself, but Joe had by and far the greatest work ethic of any of us besides my brother. No one outworked Steven. After Junior quit and moved his family to Beaumont, Joe was my brother's top ground hand. I used to get pissed at Joe for outworking me and would tell him to slow the hell down. He told me to man-up and get to humping logs!

While I grew stronger lifting logs and dragging bush, chopping and stacking wood, loading and unloading debris, what I was best at was landing jobs. My dad bragged that I was the best salesman he had. Being just a kid but very well-spoken and charismatic, I had many homeowners eating out of my palm after delivering my sales pitch. I'd ring a doorbell to a house with a dead tree. "Excuse me, I'm Robert Pruett with Pioneer Trees." I'd extend my hand for them to shake. "I noticed that you have a dead and rotting tree threatening your nice home here. Would you care to have a free estimate for a full removal and haul off?" Potential customers often thought I was cute and more often than not I got them to commit to paying for tree work.

As good as we were, sometimes accidents happen. We've dropped logs on doghouses, swimming pool water pumps and fences, and an occasional branch busted a window. We

had to deduct damages incurred from our pay, so we were very careful during a job. Usually.

Undoubtedly the biggest mistake we ever made happened in Kingwood, one of the richest areas in all of Houston. We were doing a \$5,000 job that lasted a week and we teamed up with Cousin John's company Nationwide Trees to do it.

There were about thirty pines that needed to come down in the backyard of a \$750,000 home. We had three climbers – my brother, John and Mike – and ten ground hands – my dad, Cousin Chucky, his friend Johnny Solice, Joe, Jessie, Eugene, Junior, Billy Wayne, Troy and me. We were at the end of the last day of work and everyone was tired and ready to be done with it already. My brother had topped out the last pine and brought it down to about a thirty foot pole before shimmying down to the ground. He declared the tree ready to fall.

The woman who owned the place was as cordial a customer as we'd ever had. She bought us all lunch every day and laughed and joked with us, particularly when my brother ripped the crotch of his pants out in a tree. He never wore underwear and his junk was hanging out for all to see. She couldn't tear her eyes off of my brother or stop blushing, as Junior pointed out to her, and she thought that was just the funniest thing. Yet when that pine pole split her beautiful garage in half like a cheap piece of wood (my brother had misjudged the pole by about five feet) her entire demeanor instantly changed, she screamed at the top of her lungs, started crying and became hysterical. "My garage! You destroyed my garage, you fucking imbeciles!"

We quickly loaded our gear into the truck, dejected because we knew we'd done all that work for nothing. My dad showed her husband fake insurance papers from American Trees because we weren't insured, then we left.

Cutting trees was an exciting job at times. I enjoyed getting the gear ready in the morning, smoking a joint before and after work and the joy of landing a job. But one of the most thrilling aspects of the job was illegal dumping. For awhile there we used to charge customers a fee to haul off tree debris, plus a dumping fee. Rather than pay the money to a landfill to dup we often found abandoned lots and secluded areas to dump the loads. We made a game out of quickly unloading our truck and trailer and timing ourselves, then trying to beat the previous times. But Steven and I were caught dumping out off Beltway 8 once by a cop. Fortunately, he only issued us a warning after making us load everything back into the truck. After that we found legal places to dump, most of the time. We often gave our customers a discount just to let us leave the debris in their yards or drag it out by the road for the city to pick up.

The problem with the tree service is it's a seasonal job. During winter months it's hard to find work. So we sold fire wood. Throughout the year we'd chop wood and stack it in cords. Once it got cold and we couldn't find work we'd load the truck with fire wood and find a spot in a parking lot of a shopping center or grocery store close by middle – upper

class neighborhoods (where people had chimneys) and make ten dollar and twenty dollar stacks of wood to sell. After making our stacks we retreated into the warmth of the truck to smoke pot and jam out to Z-Rock as we waited for people to stop and buy wood. We had a sign that read, “FarWood 4 Sail” that an old bum painted for John. It made people smile and pull over for wood.

Once, we were doing a job in an upscale neighborhood on the Northside of Houston called Champions Forest. It was a \$600 job. About halfway through it I asked the owner if I could use the restroom. He showed me to it. On the way back outside I passed his office and saw the \$600 cash on his desk. We usually asked for cash so we wouldn’t have to cash a check. We tried to keep everything under the table because we didn’t pay taxes. Without giving it a second thought I pocketed the money and casually walked to the truck where I stashed it under the seat.

After the job was complete, the customer went inside to get our money. He came back confused, scratching his head. He said he must’ve misplaced our money and asked my dad to please take a check, which he reluctantly did.

Everyone was bummed out because it was after 5:00 p.m. and we couldn’t cash the check to get hamburgers, as we had our hearts set on doing after work that day. I waited until we stopped at a store for gas and pretended to find \$100 bill in the restroom. They were all excited and my dad was generous enough to let me keep twenty dollars of it. If he only knew!

That was one of the first times I stole from a customer. Over the years I was bad about asking to use a customer’s restroom so I could look around for small items like jewelry, guns or cash to steal. I only got caught once. I stole a ring from a woman in Orange, Texas and she told my dad it had to be me. My dad kicked my ass real good and, from then on, I wasn’t allowed inside customer’s homes when he was on the job.

River Rats

The San Jacinto River snakes along the east side of Channelview and Houston. There were many spots along the river where people from all over came to swim. Banana Bend charged admission, so we never went there. The older generation from Cloverleaf loved barbequing and camping out off of Old Highway 90, a place where my family and our friends went many times. Those from the river bottoms seemed to like swimming down by the old train tracks closer to the 1-10 bridge, but there were rocks and junk metal out that way. One time Eugene cut himself wide open on a car submerged out there, so I never liked swimming there.

My favorite spot on the San Jacinto River was “the ropes,” under the New Highway 90 bridges. Someone – years before I ever stepped foot out there – had climbed under the bridge and attached two heavy duty ropes to the beams about fifteen feet from the first set of concrete pillars that supported the bridges. You had to swim the fifty to seventy-five feet out to that pillar and climb the wooden ladder, then someone in the water would

swing you one of the ropes to catch. There was about twenty feet of concrete slab to run along and swing off from. I loved to ride my momentum to the highest possible point, about thirty feet above the water, and let go! The two ropes were close enough together so one person could swing off in one direction while another went the opposite. My friends and I liked to do this and play “king of the rope,” a game in which the key was to try and knock your opponent off his rope. Dudes incurred serious injuries playing king of the rope, lost teeth, left the river with broken noses and black eyes, but it was seriously fun!

On any given day during the Spring or Summer you’d find more than fifty people down by the ropes. Country and rock music blared from vehicles, bonfires were lit, barbeque pits were fired up and the smell of alcohol and pot filled the air. It was a hot spot for the river rats of Cloverleaf and Channelview. We often brought our dogs, Razor and Sizzor, down to go swimming with us. From the time they were just pups, all you had to do was slap the side of our truck and they’d jump into the bed, ready for the ride down to the river. I used to help them up onto the pillar and let them dive off after the singing ropes. They absolutely loved it down there, just as we did.

There was a white sandbar next to the banks of the river by the ropes. A dense patch of woods with a trail by the sandbar lead to Crystal Lake, a small body of fresh water. You could swim out to the center of Crystal Lake and still see the bottom, the water was so clear. Many of us teenagers used to go skinny dipping back there and find a secluded part to make out with our chicks.

I have so many wild and crazy memories from the ropes and Crystal Lake. There is the time I finally built the courage to jump off the bridge. It was such a rush falling from such distance. There is the time I took my shorts off and was playing with them in the current they slipped out of my hands. It was embarrassing running to our truck to get a towel to wrap myself in. There is the time that Jessie, Eugene, Joe and I hitched a ride out there to go swimming, and told our ride to leave without us. We’d noticed a stack of seemingly abandoned bikes about hundred yards down the bank, and we planned to steal them and ride back to Cloverdump on them. It wasn’t until our ride had left that we discovered the chain locked around the bikes. We had to walk the fifteen miles back home!

Then there was the time Heather left a hickey on my neck. Heather was known for her oral pleasures – her claim to fame, if you will – and I was embarrassed that those lips had left that hickey on my neck. My trailer had become a favorite place to hang out for a lot of the youngsters from all over the east side, sort of like Eugene’s was. One night there were a group of teenagers hanging out and everyone eventually burned off except for Heather and me. We ended up sleeping together, and she left a huge passion mark on me. The next day at the ropes my friend Dough Boy asked me who gave me the hickey. I told him it was some chick he didn’t know from Northshore. I can still vividly recall sitting in the cab of my brother’s truck, rolling a joint, when it finally dawned on Dough Boy who gave me that hickey. “Holy shit!” He shouted at me from the bonfire. “I know who gave

you that hickey, Little Robert! When I left last night, it was just you and Heather left! Oh man, how does it feel to have mine and half the dudes here dicks on your neck, by proxy?" I turned red as a beet! But it must've been worse for Heather, who heard him and ran away in tears. What an asshole, that Dough Boy.

Like a Thief in the Night

Robert "Pops" Sutton moved back in with us around late 1992, while we still lived in the back trailer on Corpus Christi Street. Everyone else had moved out, so Dad gave Grandpa the middle bedroom. I remember hanging out with him in there, watching his old black and white TV set, smoking camels with him while he drank beer or wine. I could tell the years were starting to catch up to him, and he was hard of hearing and his memory was slipping. We were all happy to have him around again, especially my dad because he had him a drinking buddy. By then we weren't letting my dad go to bars to drink anymore. Not after the episode in South Texas.

One night we were having supper in the living room when we heard a loud crash outside. I opened the door and found Pops lying on the ground, bleeding from his leg. He was intoxicated and had lost his balance climbing the stairs, dropped his 40 ounce of malt liquor on the concrete sidewalk and he fell onto the broken glass. My dad, Eugene and Joe helped me lift him up and into the house, where my mom cleaned his wound. It was a gaping cut that didn't seem to want to stop bleeding.

A couple of days later Grandpa went to East Texas to spend some time with blood relatives, people I've never even met. Mom received the call from them a week later to inform us that Grandpa had died. Apparently the cut from the beer bottle had gotten infected and it killed him. He left a short will and wanted my mom to have his little Chevrolet S-10 truck. I don't even remember going to his funeral, but I seem to recall visiting his gravesite.

We were all shaken up by Pop's death. He was such an impressionable figure in the early years of my life, as I've recounted here. He gave me my first smoke – his Swisher Sweet cigars, and my first drink – his Mad Dog 20-20 wine. He was there when we needed him most, when my dad couldn't be, and his death was unexpected, left me sad that I never got to say I love you and goodbye. I guess that's why they say don't ever go to sleep angry at someone, because every moment could be our last.

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Shortly after Grandpa Sutton died, Aunt Lema had to be hospitalized because she couldn't breathe on the own. I remember going to the hospital with my parents and Eugene to see her. Uncle Bill was there, as was many of her kids and grandkids and Ricky. I sat with my Mom and Eugene in the waiting room waiting to go to her room. Mom was holding a novel open, staring blankly at the pages. She finally put it down and began crying. Eugene and I tried to console her and hugged her. She said, "I can't lose anyone else, Bubba. Not after losing Pops."

Eugene and I went in to see Aunt Lema together. She'd only met him a few times and I doubt she recognized him, but she motioned me over. She had wires and tubes running to her and couldn't speak. I hugged her and stared into her eyes, told her I loved her and everything would be okay. She squeezed me tightly, meeting my stare. I saw and felt raw fear emanating from her, as if she knew death was imminent. I recall thinking how mean she'd sometimes been, how she liked to gossip and talk shit about people. I left the room lost in thoughts about her, trying to remember some good things about her and not just the bad. I have no idea why I went straight to the negative, but I did.

Aunt Lema died that day. All of her kids – except for Ronnie and Mike who were in prison – were there with their kids, as were my parents. We later viewed her body at the San Jacinto funeral home, right on the intersection of Beltway 8 and 1-10 where she was buried. She was the matriarch and backbone of our family, and her death left a crushing blow. Brother Nash presided over the funeral services, recalling memories from the distant past, then spoke of streets of gold and a river of milk and honey. Junior wore the suit Katrina's hot check paid for, the first and only time to my recollection. My mom, Bonnie and several of the kids tried to comfort Junior and my dad. My dad shed silent tears as they lowered his sister into the ground, lost in his own mind. Eugene, Joe and I fired up joints and passed them around before disappearing into the woods and back onto the streets of Cloverleaf, anxious to wash off the stench of death.

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Steven and Marina moved into the Victoria Street apartments, right beside Justin's house, in 1992. Marina loved my mom dearly, but she was ready to have her own place and was super excited when they finally moved. We were all proud of Steven. He'd sacrificed so much of his time and energy on helping my father pay the bills over the years, so it was awesome to see him out on his own with his family.

Everything seemed perfect for several months. My brother bought furniture for their apartment, new clothes for the kids and Marina, and the cupboards and refrigerator stayed stocked with food. I know because I used to raid both regularly! I always enjoyed

hanging out with Marina and her kids, watching TV with them and getting stoned together. Of course my brother ran me off after awhile because he wanted to be alone with his family. I totally understood.

Then one day my brother's world suddenly came crashing down on him. He returned home from work to an empty apartment. There wasn't any note from Marina. She'd just packed up their clothes and disappeared with her kids, leaving my brother heartbroken, with so many unanswered questions. After about a week with no word or sign from Marina, Steven finally moved back home with us.

For about a year we had no clue where Marina had gone or why she left. I recalled her stories of disappearing on her foster family on the east coast as well as leaving her kids' father back on the west coast in the middle of the night. It seemed to be her *modus operandi*. My brother was inconsolable, yet continued to remain hopeful that he'd find her someday.

I stepped into our trailer one afternoon and found my mother crying. She held a hand over her mouth and in the other a newspaper. I read the article with shock and horror and buried my face into her chest. Chris, Marina's five year old son, had drowned to death in the San Jacinto River. Services were to be held at The San Jacinto Funeral home that day.

What had happened, we later learned, was that Marina had moved down by the river bottoms with a Pentacostal family she'd met. One Sunday after church she was outside cutting people's hair as her kids played with a group of other kids from the church. The kids had gone onto a pier and Chris accidentally fell into the water, busting his head on a wooden post. He died before anyone could get to him. Christina watched helplessly from the pier.

We went to the funeral home to view his body. Marina was there with Christina and some people from her church. My brother kept trying to talk to her, to find out what happened and why she left him, but she refused to speak to him. All she said was, "We'll talk later. Please leave me alone and let me grieve for my son."

I never even approached her that day. I looked at her with anger, resentment. I wasn't merely upset that she'd left my brother and broke his heart, I was hurt and deeply saddened by Chris' death and I blamed her. Chris was like a little brother to me. He was such fun to be around. He was super smart, very funny and just one cool ass little dude. It's almost twenty years now since I last saw him alive, and I can still hear his infectious laughter, still see him doing his "sailor," which was him rolling his stomach muscles like waves at sea, and I can vividly picture his handsome little face. I used to take him walking through Cloverleaf. Chicks would stop us and he'd charm them, be a door-opener for conversation. Out at the river he would wrap his little arms around my neck and I'd swim him out to the pillar so he could climb up and hang out while we swung off the ropes. I loved that little dude so much and his death hurt me unlike anyone else's ever had.

After the funeral my brother begged Marina to take him back. She told him she just wasn't happy with him anymore and that's why she left. She'd been taking the kids to church while they were together, but Steven never went with them. I think the people at her church advised her to end the relationship. For several months Marina blocked my brother's every attempt at reconciliation, but they hooked back up for about a month before splitting up once and for all. They just weren't meant to be together.

A couple of years after Chris' death, Marina was living in Channelview at the Ashland Trailer Park, the same one we lived in back in the 1980's before moving to Aransas Pass. She was living alone with Christina and her infant daughter Calista. I'd barely spoken to her over the years. One evening I was at the trailer park at a chick named April's trailer with a bunch of friends, smoking pot and drinking. I recall April flirting with me, but I was lost in a sea of memories and wasn't encouraging her.

Finally, I stormed out of April's trailer and walked to Marina's. I was fucking wasted because I had been slamming beers and wasn't much of a drinker. I tried to open Marina's door but it was locked, so I banged on it and demanded for her to open the motherfucker. She unlocked the door and I forced myself inside, wrestling her to the couch, screaming curses at her as I pinned her down. "How the fuck could you do that to your own son? What the fuck were you doing letting him play by the goddamn river, you stupid fucking bitch? I fucking hate you, fucking HATE YOU!"

She absorbed it all, silently crying, holding me as I sobbed uncontrollably all over her. After I calmed down some she whispered, "Chris was my baby boy. I loved him more than anything in the world." I looked into her eyes and finally saw what I'd failed to realize all along. She did blame herself, but the truth is no one can be blamed for something like that happening. No matter how careful we are, what measures we try to take to prevent tragedy, it's inevitable. All we can do is learn to deal with it.

Marina went on to tell me that she left my brother because she wasn't in love with him anymore. She apologized for breaking his heart, but she wanted me to understand that she had to leave. I got it. We spent half the night reminiscing and crying together. I had about \$300 cash in my pocket and close to an ounce of pot, and I gave most of it to her. She was a single Mom with a couple of kids to support and barely making it. I tried to help her every chance I could after that.

Caught by the Flame

It was early 1993 and I was thirteen, with raging hormones. I'd had girlfriends that let me get to first and second bases, but I'd never made it home and was growing frustrated, especially living with Joe. He was nailing chicks left and right and rubbing it in my face. Literally, he came into our room once and rubbed his fingers under my nose right after

having sex. Eugene claimed to have had sex already, as had many of our friends. The pressure was on for me to catch up!

One night before I crashed out my dad said Cousin Chucky was coming up from Corpus Christi to stay with us. Steven was headed to the bus station to pick him up. I woke up the following morning to get ready for school and found Chucky snuggled up on our couch with what looked like a short, blond dude. I mentioned it to my dad in the kitchen and he chuckled. "Naw, that's all gal, Son. She's just got her hair like a dude. She sure is purty, you'll see."

Her name was Felicia. We called her Flea, and she sure was purty. She was about twenty-two years old, short with a petite body, but curves in all the right places. She and Chucky took my room as he worked with my brother in an attempt to save money for their own place. That plan didn't work out very well. Chucky was a lazy little fucker and my brother constantly rode him down on a job. They were always arguing. When my brother had had enough of his bullshit he ran him off. Chucky and Flea ended up moving in with James Terry for a couple of weeks, and Chucky worked with James.

Flea says she awoke one morning and James was in their room with his cock out, smiling down at her as he bounced it against her lips. No one else was home. She told him to get the fuck out of the room and he left. She told Chucky what happened. James denied everything. So Chucky beat Flea up and ran her out of James' house.

Flea had nowhere to go so my dad let her stay with us until her parents came home from vacation and wired her the money to get back down to Corpus Christi. Flea slept in the back room with my sister for a couple of weeks while she waited.

A few nights after she moved in Flea, Joe and I were in the back bedroom smoking pot. Joe was putting the moves on her as she sat between us. She acted as if she couldn't be bothered by a boy his age, but it was obvious she was interested. All of their flirting while sitting close to her hot little body had me incredibly turned on. I molded my jeans around my hard-on and got Flea's attention. "Hey, Flea. Check that out."

She looked down and gasped. "Ohmigod, Robert! That's NOT all you."

"Touch the end of it then if you don't think so!" I dared her.

She hesitated a second. She was stoned and highly amused, I could tell. She tentatively poked it with her fingers. "Ohmigod! I can't believe it! That IS all you!"

I could only smile. Joe, on the other hand, turned the charm back on and recaptured her attention. I left the room for some reason and didn't return for quite some time. I opened the door and turned on the light and caught her naked, straddling Joe, his pants around his ankles! I quickly apologized and turned the light out before leaving the room.

Joe followed Flea around like a lovesick puppy dog the next day. Flea fended off his advances. "Look, man. You can't be falling in love. It was one special night. I'm going home soon. Besides, you're a sixteen year old kid." Joe finally got the message and left the trailer.

I hung out with Flea the rest of that day and night. I joked that Joe needed to move on already and she said she was glad that I understood. We were alone in the back room listening to Nirvana, smoking pot, when she asked me if I wanted to play a game. She tied a plastic bag in a string of knots and filled a bowl up with water. She turned the light out and lit her Zippo lighter, bringing the flame to the end of the plastic. We watched it burn and turn into bright, blue streaks as the flame reached each knot and melting plastic dropped into the water. She crossed her hand under the melting plastic, racing the flame, and told me to try it. She warned me to be careful as she burned her thumb once. After a few times of beating the flame I was caught by it right on the thumb. "Whoa! Check that out!" I showed her my burnt thumb. "It caught my thumb just like yours. We're forever connected."

"Aw, Robert. You're a sweet boy." She kissed my thumb.

My sister came home and walked into the bedroom. "Robert, get your ass out of here. I'm tired and about to go to sleep."

Just as I was about to leave Flea grabbed my arm. "It's okay, Tammie. He's going to sleep on the pallet with me tonight."

I was speechless. My sister stared at us and shrugged her shoulders. She told me if I disturbed her and made any noise she'd kick my ass out. Flea assured her I'd be cool. Flea flipped the Nirvana tape over and turned the volume down low, then turned the light off. I crawled onto the pallet, a little nervous.

My heart raced as Flea laid down next to me in her thin, silk nightgown. She grabbed my hand and whispered into my ear, "Thanks for being sweet and nice to me, Robert." One thing lead to another and before I knew it we were kissing, my shirt came off along with her nightgown and panties and my pants and shorts were around my ankles as she straddled me, making a man of me.

We were briefly interrupted when the door opened and light came on. Joe stuck his head into the room and caught us in the same exact position as I'd caught them the previous night. We shared clothes and I even had the same Girbaux jeans he had on the night before! He left the room quickly, as I had the night before.

Afterwards, I left the room and went and snagged a couple of cigarettes for Flea and I from my mom's pack. We'd run out earlier. I brought one lit to Flea. She smiled and kissed me, telling how sweet I was again. I was on cloud nine for days!

I left the room after awhile and found Joe asleep in our room. I shook him awake and told him I finally had sex! I was so excited and proud of myself for scoring. He only grumbled and pushed me away. "So? Go fuck her again!"

The Front Trailer

A couple in their late twenties named Shorty and Annette lived in the front trailer on Corpus Christi Street with their two kids Matt and Ashley, ten and eight years old respectively. They were friends of ours, and they often came over to our place to smoke pot with my parents and Steven. For awhile there, I never smoked in front of them because they struck us as squares almost. They made their kids go outside to play before they'd get high, and I went out with their kids to play with them. When they finally found out that I got high they were more than surprised a kid my age smoked pot. I promised I'd never let their kids see me.

After Marina left my brother, he started having an affair with Annette. Perhaps Shorty suspected because it wasn't very long after that he and Annette started having problems. Shorty eventually split with Annette and moved out and my brother briefly moved in with her. That situation didn't last long before Annette decided to move out to Spring, Texas with her mother in an upper class neighborhood. It was what was best for her kids, she said.

We moved into the front trailer as soon as Annette left. It was just a two bedroom trailer, but it was a better trailer in every way. The rooms were larger and the living room/kitchen area was huge. By then, it was just my parents, Steven, Joe and I so it was plenty of room for us. Joe and I put up a basketball hoop on the tree in the driveway, and we chopped a trail into the woods from beside our trailer.

Right around this time Eugene and Rusty both moved to Channelview and started classes at Alice Johnson Junior High. They told me how much better it was there than Northshore, how much hotter the chicks were and how they already had girlfriends. I felt abandoned by them, didn't much like being stuck at Northshore for the rest of the 7th grade. I'd gotten my wish and was pretty popular at Northshore, but my notoriety stemmed from being a bad boy. I began hanging out with the likes of Ricky Romero, Edgar Martinez and Ricky Roblez. They were the younger brothers of the OGs (Original Gangstas) of the Boyz street gang in Northshore and Cloverleaf, a rival to the Brotherhood street gang. I was cool with both gangs, did business with members of each at various times.

At school, all I cared about doing was flirting with chicks or cutting it up with my friends. At lunch break Ricky Romero and I sweet talked the girls into giving us money, which we used on weed to roll into pinner joints to sale for two dollars a piece at school. That little endeavor ended when they caught me with my pipe one day. I had it in my pocket and it fell out right in front of a teacher while sitting at my desk. The principal suspended me for a week and gave me fourteen days at SAGC! All the kids knew me, but for all the wrong reasons.

I actually failed the 7th grade. My teachers in the classes I failed gave me the option of attending summer school so I wouldn't have to repeat the 7th grade. I dreaded going to summer school at first, but it was held at the high school and there were lots of older, pretty girls there with me so it wasn't so bad. I passed the 7th grade, but about a month into my 8th grade year I was expelled for the rest of the year.

I recall the day I got expelled. I called Eugene early before school one morning and asked him to skip school with me and come with me to hit a house in Channelview. He agreed so I rode over to his house on my bike. On the way there I saw a bike in Sterling Green just laying in a yard and I told myself I'd come back for it. When I made it to his house on Woodforest he was apologetic, saying he had to go to school that day. He said he had a talk with his mom after our phone call and he really wanted to straighten up and finish school. We often said we'd be the first in our families to finish high school, but our behavior wasn't exactly conducive to reaching that goal. The truth is, Eugene had already slowed down by then. He wasn't coming out thieving with me as often. He cited his stint in the Juvenile Detention Center for stealing a stereo with Steven Canable before he met me and said he wasn't trying to get arrested again.

I left Eugene's house on foot because I wanted to steal the aforementioned bike. It was right where I'd spotted it and I easily made it off with it without anyone seeing me. A few miles into the neighborhood I ran smack into a cop. There was no escaping him from where I was at. He rolled his window down and asked me why I wasn't in school. I lied and said I'd spent the night with a friend and woke up late and was trying to get to Northshore right then. He told me to get into the back seat and he loaded the bike into the trunk. He said he'd take me to school and radioed in to the station to call the school and let them know we were on the way.

The principal was waiting out front when we arrived. He'd already called my house to tell my mom I was being expelled for an unexcused tardy, it being the final straw in a long list of disciplinary infractions that extended over two years. He was fed up with my bullshit. "Your daddy answered the phone, Robert. He said he thought you were at school and didn't have any idea why you'd be riding around Channelview. He'll be picking you up shortly."

My dad was supposed to be at work! I learned that Gary sent him home early because he was sick, so he was there to take the principal's call. My dad arrived and he had a conversation with the principal and cop. The principal explained his decision to my dad to expel me and my dad kept cutting terrifying glances at me. He was surprised to hear about my long record.

Just as we were about to leave the cop said, "Don't forget your bicycle, Robert."

My father watched as I loaded the bike into the back of our truck. He said nothing until we were about a mile away from the school when he smacked the hell out of me. "Where'd you get that goddamn bike, boy?"

"It's a friend's."

He didn't believe me. He lectured me about screwing my life up, stressed the importance of education and wondered aloud what he would do with me. In retrospect, he seemed worried about me and the road I was headed down. He could tell I was spiraling out of control. He let me know that I wouldn't be spending the year sleeping-in and running the streets. I would work with Steven every day.

A Close Call

My cousin John moved into the apartments on Hershey with his mom right before she died. He lived with us briefly while he saved his money, then he moved and started his own tree service, Nationwide Trees. He could climb and figured all he needed was a good truck, some equipment and a few steady ground hands and he'd be set.

One of his ground hands was Jessie. You'd think that just having one leg would inhibit Jessie, but he more than pulled his own weight. He'd been hopping around on one leg since he was sixteen years old and he was solidly built, ripped from head to toe and strong as an ox. He used to ride bikes with us and, using just one leg, he'd work one pedal to perfection and outrace all of us. He was also one helluva scrapper. I've watched him hop around on one leg with unbelievable swiftness and beat the hell out of dudes bigger than him. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of to lose a fight to Jessie Young. It was expected.

After work one night, Jessie and Eugene were over at John's eating supper with him and his chick, Michelle. Earlier that day John had come home for lunch and beat the hell out of a black dude leaving a crack dealers apartment. John had been told that the dude was seen stealing his pit bull puppy a week or so before and he was waiting to catch up with him. As they were eating that night there was a knock at the door. Michelle answered it and found two black dudes with AK-47s. She slammed the door and screamed for everyone to get down.

The black men sprayed the apartment with bullets. Everyone except Jessie caught the floor. He hopped over to the wall to grab a rifle leaning up against it and return their fire. He was hit by three bullets in the mid-section and had to be life-flown to the hospital.

Miraculously, not a single bullet passed through his body. One doctor said it was probably because he had a thick, inordinately muscularly core. Still, he nearly died. I visited him with Eugene and it was frightening seeing him barely holding on to life, looking so weak. Very few can take three rounds from an AK-47 and live to tell about it.

Jessie was my brother from another mother, like a son to my parents, and there was no way this action was going unpunished. My friends and I searched for the people who sprayed John's apartment and shot Jessie. The dude running the crack house acted as if he didn't really know them, that he'd only sold to them a handful of times. We didn't

believe him. There was no way we were going to let anyone who might be connected to the shooting sell dope in our 'hood. We never found the fools who did the shooting, but we made the dude running the crack house move out at gunpoint.

Uncle Sam to the Rescue

Sometime in 1992 we went to Beaumont to visit relatives, as we often did. Cousin Nancy lived in a predominantly black neighborhood, dominated by Crips, along with Mike, Tammie and a handful of others. I was in the living room when Brandy, Nancy's youngest daughter who was about fourteen then, came bursting into the house and ran straight to my father. "Uncle Sam! The niggers rode by again showing me their dicks!" Brandy recounted to my father how it wasn't the first time the black teens down the street exposed themselves to her on their bicycles. My father looked at James Allan, Brandy's father, and asked him about it. James said, "No one but her has ever seen it, Sam. She's exaggerating like always."

"That don't mean she's fucking lying, James!" Mike said. He grabbed his homemade nunchucks and put a death grip on the wooden handles. "Uncle Sam, this isn't the first time she's said them niggers flashed her. Let's put a stop to this shit right now."

Nancy and my mom tried to calm everyone down, but my father was a few beers in, and he told James Allan to show him where these boys were. James drove his truck with my father in the passenger's side and Mike and Steven in the bed. They stopped by a small group of youngsters, all Crips, just down the block. James stuck his head out the window and asked, "Do any of you know anything about someone flashing my daughter?"

The group erupted in anger. "Ain't no one know shit 'bout it, white boy. Who the fuck is you, tryin' to check me and my boys?" an older man said.

"Ok, I'm sorry, man." James back pedaled. "I was just asking, that's all."

James tried to put the truck in drive and my father stopped him cold. "Showtime, James," he told him. My father jumped out of the truck along with my brother and Mike and a small riot broke out. Mike beat one dude up with his nunchucks, my brother used his fists on another and my father stabbed the old man of the group. James Allan never left the truck the entire time.

They returned with blood on them. My family immediately left Beaumont before the cops could arrive. Nancy later informed us that the man my dad stabbed survived, but he had to walk around with some sort of brace holding his arm up. My father had pinned him against James' truck and stabbed him several times under the arm. Nothing ever came of the stabbing. Probably because they were gang members and the investigating cops were white and, according to James, sympathetic. James tells the story as if he was a part of the brawl, but everyone knows what really happened that day.

An Aspiring Stripper

After hitting a lick (doing something illegal) one night Eugene, Rusty and I had our pockets filled with cash. I wanted to start selling pot, and they pitched in with me to buy a quarter pound so we could slang twenty sacks. I called John and told him to get us one ready, we were on our way.

We hopped on our bikes and rode over to John's apartment on Hershey. John had started selling weed in Cloverleaf. He flipped a few quarter pounds at first, slanging twenty and thirty sacks, then he used that money to buy a pound and sell ounces. Soon, his primary source of income was selling weed and his tree service was just a prop for his dope business. He later became one of the biggest dealers in the Golden Triangle (Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange, Texas) when he moved to Orange.

As soon as we arrived at his place John said, "Damn, Little Robert! Have you seen that hot blonde on Manor? Chick was wearing some Daisy Dukes out on her back porch. Fine as hell! I might have to send Michelle to the store later and go hit that!"

He sold us our QP, we rolled a few joints for the road and burned off. The blonde was right where he said she was on Manor. We rode into her yard and introduced ourselves. Her name was Deedra, she was fifteen years old and had the body of a twenty year old. We got her stoned and flirted with her for about an hour before she asked us to come back later. She said her stripper mother would be home later and would for sure buy some pot from us. In the meantime, she needed to take a shower.

We returned several hours later after weighing our dope, showering ourselves and grabbing a bite to eat. All of the curtains were drawn at Deedra's trailer and no one answered our knock, yet we heard music inside. I pounded on the door and it was finally opened by Brad Issacs, a kid we knew from school. He was smiling when I asked, "What the hell are you doing here, man? Where's Deedra?"

He waved us inside. None of us could've predicted what we'd walk into when we stepped inside that trailer, not in our wildest fantasies. There were about ten boys around our age sitting in the living room as Deedra, in only a thong and bra, gave everyone lap dances to a Stone Temple Pilots' tape! We joined the fun, sparking joints and waited our turn. Deedra said her mom was a professional dancer at a club in Pasadena and she needed to practice. We were the perfect boys to practice on, she said, and we were more than happy to let her

Deedra only had one rule: no touching. The moment a boy touched her, she'd smack him and move on to the next one. Of course she'd always come back to you so we were always copping feels. I talked her into taking her bra off, then later she came out of the thong. I recall lying on the floor as she instructed. She danced all over me to "Wicked Garden" by STP, rubbing her breasts against my chest and her wet middle over my legs and abs. Her face was right next to mine when she whispered, "We might as well be

fucking this dance is so hot!” I smiled and squeezed her ass. “Why aren’t we then?” She playfully slapped my cheek and rolled off of me. Dance over.

Later, she ran all boys off except for my friends and I. Eugene had to burn off for some reason, otherwise he’d have stayed. She got dressed and acted normal when her mom and her boyfriend showed up. Her mother was an old barfly, with wrinkles and loose skin. I wondered who would pay to have her dance for them. She was drunk and obnoxious and spoke unintelligibly, slurring every word. Before she led her boyfriend into the back bedroom, she promised to return and buy some pot for us.

She seemed even more out of it when she returned. She asked if we’d been fucking her daughter and Deedra had to calm her down. She ordered Deedra to pull out a couple of chairs from the kitchen because she was going to show her daughter how it’s done. Both mother and daughter stripped down to bra and thongs for me and Rusty, competing against one another. Thankfully, Rusty got the vomit-inducing mother’s performance while sexy Deedra teased me. Afterwards, the mom wanted us to rate them from one to ten. Out of fear of being forced into another dance by the mother we gave her tens and let her win. I didn’t want those tobacco stained teeth anywhere near me!

Later, I brought Joe over to meet Deedra. Over the next couple of weeks we charmed her and they hooked up. For about a month straight we all partied day and night (it was summertime), doing cocaine and even going on a mini crack smoking binge. We went through a quarter ounce a night, easily. We’d go out thieving and use the money on dope, then sleep all day and do it again the next night. Eventually, after Deedra and her mother got into a fight, she moved in with us. Joe and Deedra grew really close really fast, and he wanted to bring her everywhere we went, even to break into places. Those were some wild and crazy times.

Before I met Deedra, I’d never smoked crack. Eugene, Rusty and I had started snorting coke after a dealer gave us a sixteenth for a TV set we’d stolen, but crack was an entirely different high. The rush washes over you, leaves you breathless in a euphoric trance for about ten to fifteen minutes before you begin craving it again. It was easy to see how people became so addicted to it, and it shouldn’t have been any surprise that Deedra became strung out.

I first noticed that Deedra was hooked on crack while we were at a crack house. By then Joe and I both had stopped doing coke and crack, but we were in the game and we sold it occasionally. We were at the crack house to drop some dope off for another dealer. Deedra and Joe got into a fight because she tried to take some crack from the offering hand of the dealer and Joe stopped her. “Hey, I thought we said no more of that shit?” He asked her. She left it alone, but I could see the addiction in her eyes. She was craving a hit. I later caught her flirting with that same dealer, but chalked it up as Deedra just being Deedra – a flirt and a tease. I didn’t tell Joe.

I also never told Joe when Deedra came on to me. I was headed home from a dope house after scoring a quarter ounce of coke to sale, and I ran into her at the end of my block. I showed her the dope, just fucking with her, and her eyes got wide as she wrapped an arm around me and said, “Robert, you know I’ve always had the hots for you. Why haven’t we ever fucked, baby? Oh, because your stupid ass brought Joe into my life! But you know I’ve always wanted you, right?”

It was bros before hos with Joe, but I knew he’d fallen in love with Deedra and, as much as I was tempted, I didn’t take advantage of her. I did give her a few bumps of coke and told her to take it into the bathroom and not let my dad catch her with it. He knew what I did, or at least suspected it, but to put it in his face was asking for him to put a boot in my ass.

Deedra continued to smoke crack behind Joe’s back. We also suspected her of selling herself to an old man in a white truck, a dude we knew for a fact bought sex from the prostitutes on Nimitz Street. Joe was so in love with her that he didn’t want to believe it. Not until the day we were standing at the dead-end sign in front of my trailer and the white truck dropped her off at the end of the block. My brother and homeboy was visibly shaken as Deedra pranced up to him and tried to hug and kiss him. He pushed her away. She acted hurt and confused. Without explanation he told her to pack her shit and get the fuck out. She tried to reason with him, but he wasn’t hearing it. She then asked me if she could stay since it was my parents’ trailer. I told her to just go.

After she left to pack I told Joe, “Sorry, man. But she’s a dope fiend and you know what they say? ‘Once a dope fiend always a dope fiend.’”

Bad Influence

In the 1980’s Cousin John had a chick named Julie Poole, the mother of his first three children. Julie remained friends of the family after John broke it off with her in the early 1990’s. I’m not entirely sure how or why, but my dad took Julie in while we were living in the back trailer on Corpus Christi Street. She didn’t have anywhere else to go, I don’t guess.

It wasn’t long before Julie and my sister began hanging out together. They’d walk the streets of Cloverleaf just to get out of the house for awhile, or so they said. I found them at the Fleabag Motel, the same one where we lived years before, talking to a well-known crackhead. I stopped by on my bike to see what they were up to and it was clear to me that my sister was on cocaine. Tammie is mentally handicapped. She doesn’t have initiative. She’s a follower, easily influenced by the people around her. When I realized she was high on coke I pulled her to the side. “Sis, please don’t be messin’ with any coke. That stuff’s poison, you hear me?”

“I ain’t doin’ it, Bubba.”

“Tammie,” I tried to be stern. “I ain’t stupid, okay? That shit will eat you alive and I don’t want you fuckin’ with it!”

“I said I ain’t, Robert Lynn! You don’t tell me what to do, I’m a grown woman!”

For about a month Julie and Tammie got cracked out. Tammie spent every penny of her SSI check on it. My parents were pissed because she didn’t give them any money that month. I came home in the middle of them arguing about it, and I gave her and Julie up, told my dad everything. Had Julie been a man my dad would have beat the living shit out of her, or worse. Instead, he told her to pack her shit and get out of his house. Julie ended up moving to Beaumont with some Crips who sold crack. I blame Julie for my sister’s addiction to crack.

Julie’s absence didn’t cure my sister, sadly. Tammie ended up moving out and in with a guy in the apartment on Corpus Christi Street and Franklin. They both receive SSI checks and blew most of them on crack. It used to piss me off to see them all cracked out together. Once, they asked me to sell them some crack because the dude knew I slang it. My sister said, “Don’t ask him! He’ll snitch on us to his daddy!”

“No I won’t, Sis. How much y’all looking for?” I didn’t have any crack and wouldn’t have sold them any if I did. I took their money and gave them candle wax with some of that toothache medicine rubbed on it. They didn’t know they’d been burned until they tried smoking it! When the dude came looking for me my brother met him on the front porch and knocked his ass right off of it, running him away from our trailer. She ran off after him. Nothing we said or did could help her.

Another time, Joe and I went to a crack house to make a drop for one of the biggest dealers on the east side. We were in a stolen car to make the delivery, per our connect’s request. We knew the dude who ran the place well, having partied with him and his chick and done plenty of business with them before. We stayed awhile after the exchange just to shoot the shit.

There was a knock at the door. A short, skinny and dark as coal black dude with bug eyes came in to buy some dope. He talked fast and cracked jokes, which made us all laugh. When he went into the kitchen with the dude of the house Joe asked me if I knew who he was. I’d never met the dude and had no recollection of ever even seeing him before. Joe said, “That’s Tammie’s pimp.”

I’d heard my sister was selling herself for crack. We’d seen her out on Nimitz before, where the whores gathered. Joe even mentioned the pimp before, but I’d never thought much of it. Seeing him and meeting him, though, made something inside of me snap. I launched myself at him, yanked him to the floor and rammed my fist into his face a couple of times before they could pull me off him. The pimp was in a house full of white street hustlers and didn’t want any trouble. He just kept repeating, “I’m cool, man, I’m cool. It’s cool.”

Joe apologized to the dealer and physically removed me from the house. Thankfully, I'd left my gun in the car. When I reached for it Joe snatched it out of my hands and snapped at me. "Little Robert! Brother. Chill the fuck out. You can't stop shit. You can't change nuthin. She's gonna do what she wants to do and keep doing whatever it takes to get her next hit. Let it go." He was right, but it still fucked my head up meeting my sister's pimp. My head was twisted from the experience.

Valuable Experiences

Joe and I were cruising our bikes through The Dump when he swerved in to an apartment complex. He said he knew some chicks living there and winked at me. The chicks were a couple of obese women in their late thirties/early forties! They were wearing nightgowns, chain smoking cigarettes and watching soap operas on their bed in the living room. I was astonished when Joe crawled into bed with them and began fondling the uglier of the two. I sat uncomfortably in a chair by the bed, trying not to look at anything except the TV set, as if I'd been dying to know what would happen next on General Hospital. Finally, I said, "Hey, Joe. Man, I forgot to tell you something. Can you step outside with me a sec?" Outside Joe asked, "What's up?" "What's up?" I was beside myself. "Those aren't chicks! They're fat and old and ugly, dude! What the fuck?" "Look, dude. Those are women, not stupid, inexperienced little girls. They've been around the block a time or two, and they can teach you things. Trust me, a few days with them and you'll have all the hot, young chicks all over you. Just roll with it, man!"

"I'll pass, you freak!"

I left Joe alone to gain all the experiences he wanted. Joe didn't discriminate when it came to sex. He got it wherever and with whoever he could. Maybe that was his secret with the girls? He had experience on me, that's for sure.

Once, Joe had this big girl named Jennifer that he was banging from Channelview High School. He'd met her at school, and I was with him over at her place one time. While they made out on the couch I looked at the wall of pictures. There was a pretty redheaded girl that caught my eye and I asked Jennifer who she was? "Niki Collins, one of my best friends. She lives down the road."

"Damn, she's hot!" I said.

A couple days later Jennifer hooked me up with Niki. The four of us talked on the phone between my place and Niki's and the girls talked us into coming over there. She lived on the other side of Channelview, about ten miles away, but Joe and I decided to take the train tracks and walk, for some reason.

By the time we arrived I was ready to go inside and relax. The girls met us at the end of Niki's block and told us to be quiet as they lead us to a bedroom window. I wouldn't

have walked all that way had I known we'd have to sneak inside! Or maybe I would have. Niki was pretty fine.

We crawled into the window of her brother's room. I'm not sure where they were at the time, but I knew her parents were asleep in their room because she kept reminding us to whisper. We kept the light off the entire time. Joe and Jennifer were on the bottom bunk, and Niki and I crawled on the top bunk. We were in the middle of the act when, suddenly, the door opened and light spilled over our nakedness! I looked up and saw Niki's mom's face, staring directly at me and her daughter's backside! The mom screamed for her husband, and Joe and I, followed by Jennifer, got dressed at light speed and flew out the window!

Joe and Jennifer spent the night in some nearby woods so they could have sex. I walked back home, incredibly frustrated. Niki later became my girlfriend, and I was cool with her parents, but that's probably because her mom didn't recognize me from that night. Or if she did she didn't let on to it.

Not So Fast

The same train tracks that lead to Niki's house were the same that Joe sometimes walked to get to Channelview High School. Joe told me about the "perfect" house to hit along those tracks. He said he'd discovered it at the intersection of the tracks and North Brentwood and it was nestled beside a patch of woods.

One cold and rainy day we went on foot to hit that house. We crept through the woods and forced our way into the place. We loaded several bags with watches, other various jewelry, cameras and a couple of pistols. We stashed everything in the woods, then returned to the little shed beside the house. Inside it we stole some tools and a Stihl chainsaw with a sixty inch bar on it! We moved all of that to the woods as well.

Joe wanted to leave everything in the woods, in a spot we knew it wouldn't be found, and come back later in a vehicle and get it. I wanted to at least take the chainsaw, just in case they found the stuff. I knew my brother would salivate at the mouth at the sight of that bad motherfucker! Joe argued with me, but he finally gave in and said, "Fuck it! Grab the saw. I'll grab the cameras, jewelry and guns."

Carrying the saw on my shoulder we crossed North Brentwood and headed down the tracks. We made it about a hundred yards before a guy in a truck stopped on the tracks at North Brentwood, stepped out and yelled after us, "HEY! THAT'S MY DAMN CHAINSAW!"

I dropped the chainsaw and we darted into the woods. Joe bitched me out for not listening to him and being a hardhead. We were in the middle of the oval road of North and South Brentwood. We knew we'd have to cross a street somewhere to get to the safety

of the woods connected to Cloverleaf or Channelview. Being inside that oval, which stretched about five miles in circumference, we were trapped. We decided to walk close to the woods and off the tracks up to Dell Dale Road and try to pass it. If we could just pass Dell Dale we thought we'd be in the clear. We got about twenty yards from Dell Dale and waited in the woods for about ten minutes until the traffic dissipated. Just as we were crossing the road a police cruiser came out of nowhere, turned its lights on and sped towards us! We broke off running!

Joe ran into the woods on one side of the tracks and I ran to the other. I was in a thin patch of trees and knew I wouldn't be able to hide there, so I jumped a fence into a backyard and again into another patch of woods. I then decided to cross the tracks so I wouldn't lose Joe. I didn't see any cops so I made a dash for it, but no sooner did I step out into the open when several cops appear from the woods on the other side of the tracks and ordered me to the ground with their guns.

They cuffed me and lead me to a cop car, where Joe was already in custody in the backseat. We were taken to the Wallisville substation, charged with burglary of a habitation. They questioned us and, miraculously, released us to my father. They'd called him after we told them he was my dad and Joe's guardian. He showed up and had a conversation with the cops, and then they simply let us leave with him.

My dad was silent at first. When he finally spoke he was calm. "I'm disappointed in you boys." He was misty-eyed as he told us about prison, how were on the fast track there if we didn't knock the bullshit off. He said he couldn't beat the system, that he tried to do just that for over thirty years and look where it landed him: an uneducated, burnt-out, ex convict struggling to make it. He wanted better for us and begged us to please stop. We promised him we were done with that lifestyle.

I was given a court date and sentenced to six months of probation. Joe skipped his court date, but was later arrested during a raid on my trailer. He was detained for about six months in a placement home for juveniles. Once he was released, I don't recall him ever robbing or stealing again. He smoked pot and drank occasionally, but it seems he learned from that experience. The same can't be said about me.

Don't Shit in Your Own Backyard Parts II, III and IV

After we moved out of the back trailer, a group of thieves in their twenties moved in behind us. They were three men and three women. We were cool with them, hanging out at their place and playing their stolen instruments while we got high together. Joe even started banging one of the chicks.

These people had a trailer filled with stolen goods. Pistols, rifles, a huge entertainment center, stereo systems, huge speakers, guitars, drums, basses and amplifiers. They didn't work. They went out thieving, much like I did but they were a little more organized.

One night everyone wanted to go down to the ropes for a swim. As my brother, Joe and others got ready I told them I'd pass because I had to go take care of some business in Northshore. No one seemed to think much of it as we all went our separate ways.

Juan and Ernesto Jr. used to live right down the road from me on Corpus Christi Street. They sold pot and coke out of their apartment and kept a house full of youngsters and customers. I used to hang out with them and play Nintendo with Juan, whose collection of games rivaled my own. I also used to fence stolen goods through them and their dad. Just a month or so before I walked into their apartment wearing a trench coat. Once inside, I opened it up to reveal seven handguns, as if I was some kind of 1920's gangster! They bought all of them for a couple of ounces of coke. Ernesto Jr. had told me if I came across any speakers to holler at him, he'd buy them for coke or cash.

When everyone left for the ropes I rode down to Juan and Ernesto's. I asked Ernesto Jr., who was home alone, if he still wanted some speakers. He did. I explained my plan to him. He thought about it a second and said he wanted to come with me. I tried to protest because I figured he'd want to knock off some of the price, but he assured me he'd give me a good deal in coke. We took his dad's truck down my place and backed it right up to the back trailer. I'd lived there over a year and knew how to get inside easily. We quickly loaded the truck with the speakers and made a clean getaway without anyone seeing us. He weighed me out a righteous eight-ball and I was on my way.

The thieves returned with my brother and Joe a little later. They were furious when they discovered they'd been robbed. They just KNEW it was me, but I denied it and they couldn't prove it. For the longest they didn't want me around their place, but they eventually eased up on me and let me hang out again. I really couldn't care less back then. I had no loyalty to those people.

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Around this same time I robbed Katrina and Dan again. My mom sent me to ask Katrina for some milk. She opened the door with her hand behind her back, saw it was me and let me in. She placed a brand new .357 revolver on the counter as she got the milk.

I couldn't stop thinking about the gun for over a week. It was chrome, had a long barrel and wood grain handle. I absolutely had to have it. I waited for them both to leave one day and broke into their trailer, found it under their mattress and took it. I stashed it for awhile just in case they said anything about being burgled, but they never did.

My parents were struggling financially. I overheard them with my brother at the kitchen table worrying about bills. I made a rash decision because I wanted to help. I

retrieved the .357 and placed it on the table in front of my father. He looked up at me and said, “Ooo-Wee, boy! Where in the hell’d you get this?”

“Does it matter?” I asked. “I took it away from some kids down the street. They said they stole it in Channelview. I figured they’d just shoot themselves with it so I strong-armed them for it. Can’t you sell it? All I want is half the money and you keep the rest to cover those bills.”

He sold it to one of his bosses at Bill Dee’s for a mere \$250! I could’ve gotten at least twice that since the thing had never been fired! He said the guy he sold it to had been good to him and he wanted to return the favor. He gave me twenty bucks and told me he’d rip my head off and shit down my neck if he caught me with another pistol.

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Jeremy Bellamy was a tall, skinny dude about five years older than me with really long, burgundy hair. He sold LSD most of the years I’d known him, and he often came around with exotic weed. One afternoon while I was home he showed up to see what I was up to. We got stoned in my living room and he asked if I knew where to get a portable air-compressor? He said he’d give me a sheet of double-dipped LSD for one.

I told Jeremy I’d seen one across the street in my neighbor’s yard and I thought I could hop their fence from the woods and get it. The people across the street had been living there for years. We weren’t friends with them. They were squares. The husband had a large shed in the back where he worked on cars and he had lots of tools. It’s a wonder that I’d not robbed him to that point. Jeremy said he wouldn’t help, but if I safely got the air-compressor to his truck I had myself a deal.

I slipped over the fence to their yard from the woods and found the air-compressor in his shed. I realized it was too heavy for me to lift over the fence alone so I went back to my trailer and asked Jeremy to come help me. He wasn’t trying to hear it. “You find a way to get it to my truck and I’ll help you lift it into the back, but I’m not going with you to steal it.”

I jumped the fence through the woods again and pushed the air-compressor to the entrance of their fence. I looked down the road and made sure no one was around and I quickly pushed it across the street. Jeremy was waiting on me and we loaded it into his truck.

As he was pulling out of my driveway the old man a few lots down stepped out onto the road. Jeremy panicked and peeled out down the road, nearly running the old dude over! I freaked out and ran inside my trailer, kicking myself for being so stupid.

Jeremy called me about five minutes later. “Goddammit, Little Robert! You’re going to get me thrown into jail! I got a newborn son. I can’t deal with this shit, man. I’m about to dump this shit in the middle of the road!”

“Calm down, dude!” I was a nervous wreck myself, but I had a plan. “You know the side road where we used to dump illegally on Beltway 8?”

“Yeah. What the fuck, man?”

“Look, just drop it off there. I won’t say shit about you. I think I can fix this. Don’t worry, you’ll be okay. Leave it where I can find it, though!”

My mom and brother showed up just before the police did. The old man gave everything up. He said he watched me cross the street with the compressor. Thankfully, Jeremy didn’t hit him. My mom begged the cop not to arrest me. The cop wanted to know who the truck belonged to. I told the cop that the person in the truck had nothing to do with it, that it was all on me, but that I could get the stolen property back. The cop made me a deal: take him to the where the air-compressor was and he wouldn’t arrest me, but it was up to our neighbors whether or not charges would be filed.

I took him to the air-compressor and it was returned to our angry neighbors. They weren’t lenient on me. Charges were filed and I was again convicted of burglary of a habitation. My probation was extended for one year, and I had to do community service. Furthermore, Ms Ann, our landlord, was notified and she evicted us.

My dad kicked my ass when he got home. Again I got the lecture about not shitting in my own backyard. He didn’t want me stealing at all, but damn sure not where I lived. Again, I’d gotten us kicked out of a place. My father was at a loss for what to do with me. He knew I was headed down the road to nowhere, that I was wasting my youth.

Hopelessly Entagled

Channelview-Avenue C Trailer Park

Spring of 1994

I needed a fresh start. That's what I kept telling my family, friends and myself after we moved back to Channelview. I'd worn out my welcome at Northshore Middle School and had been dreading returning that Fall. Eugene and his family helped us find a comfortable 2 bedroom trailer in a trailer park on Avenue C, a place where they lived years before. In the living room of our new place I discussed the situation with my parents and Eugene. Everyone agreed that Channelview was a better area than Cloverleaf. Eugene said I'd enjoy going to Alice Johnson Junior High, where there were supposedly better teachers and, according to Eugene, a much cooler student body. Again, Eugene and I vowed we'd straighten our lives out and be the first in our families to finish high school. For the first time in a long time I felt optimistic about my future and truly looked forward to getting back on track academically and in life. I just knew the move to Channelview was a step in the right direction.

Then I stepped out into the trailer park. I'm not the type to lament about my fate and minimize my own responsibility, but there's no doubt that the environment in which we are reared and the people we are surrounded with have a great influence on our behavior and development. The trailer park on Avenue C, like most trailer parks and apartment complexes in Channelview, was a den of thieves and thugs. Most of them were teenagers and young adults from Sterling Green and the nice parts of Channelview. They were rebellious, white and Hispanic kids who were attracted to the thug life; wannabe gangstas who didn't have to live that lifestyle out of necessity, but rather did so to piss their parents off. They liked to hang out with the real white trash in the poor areas, sag their baggy pants and dress gangsta, yet they listened to a mix of gangsta rap, metalcore and even country music. Because they had money to buy drugs and carry guns they thought they were "real" and hardcore. Jessie had warned me about some of these boys. "Those dumbasses have nice parents and good homes to go to, but they like rolling with us. They're a bunch of whiney little punks." Jessie was known to strong-arm the Channelview

gangstas for their dope and guns when he ran into them. He got away with it because he was a legend on the east side, I guess.

A couple of days after we settled into our new place I ran into Aaron from Cloverleaf. He was with a small group of teenagers around the front porch of the trailer across from mine. I walked over to say hello to him and a couple of the aforementioned Channelview gangstas named Weasel and Chris; they were fraternal twins. I knew Mandy, then a 15 year old with long, straight brown hair and a birthmark on the side of her neck, through Rusty's ex-girlfriend Ki, and, of course, Aaron was the dude I used to skip school with, but the rest were new faces. Amy lived in the trailer with her mother, Monkey, and her younger siblings Amanda and Bobby. Monkey and her ex-husband Farmer were from Cloverleaf and were old friends of my brother and James Terry. Farmer was a giant cornfed country boy who, according to my brother, gave Monkey her nickname. Farmer said, "When she sits down in those tight shorts she always wears you can see her monkey - that's why I call her Monkey!" Apparently, Farmer liked to punch on Monkey and once she finally woke up she left him and moved her kids to Channelview. Shortly after we moved next door, Amy, Monkey's daughter from another marriage, moved back down from North Carolina where she'd lived with her biological father. She later told me that she couldn't stand Farmer and that he was the reason she left Texas.

Monkey was an old barfly and crackhead. She left Amy alone for days at a time to play mother to her siblings. Consequently, their place was often packed with teenagers who constantly loved to party. The day I met Amy Aaron said, "I got a case of Busch beer in her ice box and little Baby G pinched some weed from his old man's stash, so it's on!!" We spent the rest of the night getting toasted with Amy's stereo blastin' out death metal and gangsta rap while us boys tried to get into the girl's panties. Amy had shoulder-length, curly blonde hair and big brown eyes with porcelain skin. She was, literally, girl-next-door cute, but she wasn't easy. While she entertained our constant flirting, she was actually pretty shy and was kinda insecure. None of us got anywhere with her that first night, but Chris and Mandy rocked the trailer in the back bedroom.

About a week later Amy confided in me on my front porch. She'd agreed to be with Aaron but didn't like how crazy he sometimes acted, and he could not keep his mouth shut. He'd told all of us Amy let him feel her up one night, and it bothered her, the rumors. I was surprised that she even liked Aaron. He had a face full of acne and could be really annoying and I told her as much. "Amy, you're one fine ass chick! You could do WAY better than Aaron!"

"Oh yeah?" She giggled. "With who?"

"Uh, hello!?" I was pretty confident. Maybe it was all the drugs? "Don't you know I've had the hots for you since I first laid eyes on you?"

"How could I not, Robert?" She smiled. "I like you. You're cute. But I've already started something with Aaron and I should give it a chance."

"Okay, I understand. I just think you're so beautiful." She didn't resist as I fingered her hair back from her eye and leaned in for a kiss.

Later that evening Amy returned to my place. My dad and brother were already asleep, but my mom hung out with us for awhile before crashing out herself. Once we were alone, Amy said she broke up with Aaron. She said her mother was home so she wouldn't need to be there for her siblings. She had that look in her eyes when she asked, "Can I spend the night here?"

"Sure you can." I was floating on clouds.

She squeezed up against me on the couch and we kissed and made out for about thirty minutes before my pager vibrated. It was Dough Boy. I called him and he asked if I wanted a sixteenth of coke for \$50 bucks? That was a steal of a deal. I turned to Amy and asked if she wanted to do some coke? She shrugged and nodded yes. I asked her to wait on me while I drove my brother's truck to Dough Boy's off Woodforest, said it shouldn't take more than ten minutes. She told me to hurry back.

I put the truck in neutral and pushed it down the driveway at a safe enough distance to start without my folks hearing. I drove to Dough Boy's house and made the exchange with him. I ended up staying there for about 45 minutes because everytime I got ready to leave someone I knew showed up and I got caught up in conversation. By the time I made it back Amy was asleep. I crawled up behind her on the couch and kissed her awake. She said it was about time I got back, that she changed her mind about doing coke and all she really wanted was to have my lips back on hers. We had sex on the couch and fell asleep together.

Amy was my girlfriend for about 3 weeks. I was just the second boy she'd been with and, no, Aaron wasn't the first. Her first was a guy from North Carolina. I ruined things between us because, like Aaron, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I told a room full of teenagers that Amy and I did all kinds of things sexually that we never even did. I was simply exaggerating to my peers, as boys are sometimes disposed to do. The rumors spread like wildfire and Amy was crying when she confronted me. "You don't kiss and tell, huh? Fucking asshole!"

Running With Thugs

Though I never joined a gang and almost never dressed "gangsta," I ran with a few thugs as a teenager. On Avenue C it was Weasel, Chris and Aaron, at first. We'd get high and sometimes drunk together and party at not only my trailer park but several others up and down the Channelview train tracks. We used Weasel and Chris' money to pay for everything, and when it ran out we burglarized their grandparents' house. The next thing

I knew I was out stealing again every night, inextricably entangled in the fast life once again.

We met a pair of brothers in their 30's living in my trailer park. Theirs was one of several trailers where we hung out and got wasted. The cool brother was named John and he owned the car. His brother James was a freakin' weirdo and we all thought he was gay. James couldn't stand us doing drugs in his trailer and he incessantly bitched out John. To get away from his brother, John took us out cruising.

John drove us any and everywhere we wanted to go. We paid for the gas and got him high, so he didn't mind whatever we wanted to do. Even if it involved him waiting in the car while we burglarized houses and buildings and toted the stolen stuff to his car. Nor did he mind us strapping diesel tires to the roof of his car after we stole them from parked 18-wheelers. I'd learned from Boo, Eugene's step dad, that a used tire would easily sell for \$100 bill at Key truck stop on I-10 and a new one went for \$150 a pop. He did get a little nervous at times, but he didn't mind being our getaway driver; he just wasn't cool with breaking into a place with us.

One of the reasons John was so compliant is he was addicted to smoking crack. He blew all of his money on crack rock. Soon, we were all either snorting cocaine or smoking crack together. We'd sleep all day and wake up in the evening to go out and rob and party, then we'd crash out around dawn and get up and do it all over again.

One night Aaron said he knew where a pistol was, a .380 semi-automatic. We'd already traded Weasel and Chris' guns for cocaine and needed a pistol, or so we thought. The .380 was under the seat of a truck on a piece of property out of New Highway 90. It belonged to one of Aaron's brother's friends and he didn't want to be seen near the place, so I went to steal it. I had to hop a fence and bust out the front window with a rock, quickly get the gun and run back through a field at lam. The gun was mine, though, so I wasn't complaining.

They wanted to sell the gun for crack; I wanted to use it to rob people for their crack. We'd added another dude to our group, a 26 year old crackhead from another trailer park named Mike. Mike said we could ride into cracktown and jack black crack dealers who sold crack on street corners all night long. We'd already been buying dope from such areas throughout Houston and had even pulled some "Zulu" moves, which is when a dealer sticks his hand into the car to show you the sizes of his rocks and you slap his hand and speed off with the dope in the car. You could only get away with that a couple of times in an area in the same car before they'd recognize you and start shooting.

Mike had a plan. We would wait until after 3am on a Saturday night, after the dealers had made most of their money for the night, when there were only a scattered few left selling dope, then we'd move in and rob one. One dealer that we'd been observing kept opening a meter box on the ground and I deduced that he kept the majority of his dope in it in case the police showed up. John was supposed to stop by the guy, and Weasel, in

the front seat, would ask him for a \$100 piece. If the dealer stuck his hand in the car with a lot of rock Weasel would simply Zulu him and we'd burn off. If the dealer didn't have much dope Mike would draw the gun on him while Chris and I jumped out and shook him down for all his drugs and money. We'd also check the meter.

The plan went horribly wrong. Just as the dealer reached into the car with the dope Mike shot him three times in his mid-section and he spun to the ground screaming in agony, clutching his side. The other black dealers in the parking lot of the apartment complex nearby ran away at the sound of gunshots. I freaked out and started panicking, and John was about to race off when Mike got hostile and pointed the gun at him and demanded he stop the car. Mike then told Chris and Aaron to get out and "Shake the nigger down." They quickly got his money and what little dope he had and John got us out of there as fast as he could.

Mike apologized repeatedly on the freeway. Everyone was freaking out, anxious to get back to the trailer park and lay low for awhile. First we had to get rid of the gun. We didn't want any pistol used in a shooting. Mike directed us to an apartment complex on the outskirts of Northshore where he said he knew a dealer who'd buy the gun and sell us some crack for the money we got off the guy Mike shot. We waited for over an hour after Mike had asked us to wait in the parking lot while he went to take care of business. Aaron and I went looking for him finally and never found him. He burned us. Thankfully, I never saw Mike again.

We never knew how seriously the black dealer was wounded or even if he survived. He was shot in the side with a small caliber weapon so he probably made it. I hope he made it. To this day when I think about that night I can still hear his scream after he'd been shot and fell to the ground writhing in pain.

How Do I Love Thee?

Not long after Amy Perry dumped me I began seeing Niki Collins again. Niki and I were together for awhile when I lived on Corpus Christi Street. I split up with her when she took Jennifer's side over mine after Joe's ex-girlfriend said I put the moves on her. I did not, but that was the end of Niki and me back then.

Niki was at the Shamrock on Sheldon Road when I ran into her. She seemed super excited to see me, to tell me that Jennifer wasn't her friend anymore and how sorry she was for siding with her. I invited her over to my new trailer, more than willing to forget about the past.

We were in my bedroom making out when Dough Boy popped into my room. Dough Boy was several years older than me, an old school gangsta from back in the days when even Jessie and Eugene were in the Mob Squad gang. He was a slightly chubby kid who

always wore Dickies pants and wifebeater shirts and a pair of Chuck Taylor's. He was a funny dude and hella cool to hang out with, but at that moment I wanted him to get lost. He sat down on the bed next to Niki and winked at me. He put his hand on her leg and asked, "How about you let me and Lil Robert get some of that sweet-sweet?"

Niki didn't protest at all. She was completely cool with whatever we wanted to do. I wasn't comfortable with it though. Dough Boy must've noticed my reluctance because he grabbed my hand and shoved it between her legs. Niki covered ma hand with hers, encouraging me, but I didn't feel right so I got up and left the room.

Dough Boy stormed after me and was visibly upset. "What the fuck, Lil Robert?! She's a straight freak. I pulled a train on her before, dude. Let's go tear it up!"

"Naw, man. I'm cool. You can have her."

Dough Boy got pissed at me and told me to go back inside and have my fun. He walked off and I went back inside to talk to Niki. She said she didn't want us both, that she just wanted me, but thought that was what I wanted so she just went along with it. I made it clear that I didn't want anyone else touching her, that she was my girl. We ended up having sex and talking until about 10pm when she had to go home. My brother drove us to her place and I kissed her before she got out and promised to call her.

Niki and I were together for a couple of months. She called me one day to tell me her grandfather had died and she'd be out of town with her parents to be with relatives for about a week. She said she'd miss me like crazy and would call as much as she could. I told her I'd miss her too and couldn't wait for her return.

Steven Canable was fresh out of TYC (Texas Youth Commission) and hanging out with some of us in my bedroom. He was a couple of years older than me and, even though his parents were middle class and he didn't have to be a criminally-minded gangsta, he was well-respected and quite popular on the east side. He used to be Eugene's best friend and was his first fall-partner. We'd been partying with Steven, welcoming him back to the freeworld, and it was a Friday night so we were trying to figure out what to do. Suddenly, an idea occurred to me. I picked up the phone and dialed Niki's number, just to make sure their house was empty, then I laid out my plan for the night.

After the shooting John quit rolling with us, so we didn't have wheels. I told everyone to be ready around midnight, when my parents and brother would surely be asleep, then I pushed our truck down the driveway and used it to hit Niki's house. It wasn't the first time I stole our truck to commit a crime and it wouldn't be the last.

Once we were inside Niki's house I told everyone to stay away from her bedroom; the rest of the house was fair game. We loaded my truck with their entertainment center, her father's gun rack and rifles and anything else we thought we could fence off. Her brother had a dirt bike that I wanted but it wouldn't fit in the truck with all the other stuff already loaded, so I let Steven - the oldest of the group - drive my truck back to the trailer park and I rode the bike.

I had to push the bike down the train tracks before starting it because I didn't want any of Niki's neighbor's hearing it and calling the law. It took me a minute to get used to the bike. I had to be careful along the gravel until I got to Ridlin Road, then I gunned the bike as fast as it would go down the street. I opened the throttle wide and felt free and wild, without a care in the world. I slowed down to make a turn and misjudged the angle. I flew into the ditch one way, the bike the other. I totaled the bike in the exact same spot where Jessie lost his leg years before, but I came away with just a few bruises and scratches.

When Niki returned home she called me. "Robert, did you rob my house?"

"Huh?" Her bluntness made me nervous. How did she know it was me? "Your house was robbed?"

"Yeah, and my parents know it was one of my friends because my room was not touched. My TV and VCR are still there; everything else is gone."

I denied it and acted offended that she would even suspect me. She said she didn't care. She'd been fighting with her parents for a long time by then and she was sick of living at home. About a week later she called me and said she was running away. I told her to meet me at my trailer park where it meets the train tracks at midnight. I said we could live in an empty trailer for a few days until we figured something out. She said she would steal about \$400 cash from her father's wallet and her mom's jewelry so we'd have some money to work with.

I had a few hours to burn before midnight. Steven Canable and Dough Boy showed up with three really hot high school chicks from the northside of Houston. One of them was a country girl with curly brown hair and she wore the tightest Rocky Mountain jeans I ever saw on a girl. Steven said they were headed to a trailer park on the other side of Channelview and wanted me to join them. Rocky Mountain Chick had been giving me the eyes and Steven winked at me and nodded at her, which was all the incentive I needed.

I thought I could go with them and hang out for about an hour or so and then catch a ride back in time to meet Niki. But everything fell to pieces on me. Something happened and Dough Boy had to leave with the ride. I should have left with him and had him drop me off but I dropped the ball on that. To top it off Steven and Rocky Mountain Chick were rubbing all over each other and I was clearly out of the picture on that front, so I ran home as fast as I could.

I was over an hour late. Niki was nowhere to be found. The next day she called me from Pasadena and said she waited on me as long as she could before leaving and catching a bus to a friend's place. I gave her some lame excuse but she didn't seem to buy it. I think she realized that I wasn't worth the effort. That was the last I ever heard from Niki Collins.

Backyard Trouble, Again . . .

Junior and his clan moved into a trailer on Avenue C right after we did. Dad often said Junior was his favorite nephew and Junior always seemed to live near, around or with his Uncle Sam. And as much as his kids embarrassed me, I had a lot of fun with them over the years. They looked up to me and liked to follow and emulate me.

One evening I was in Junior's livingroom playing Nintendo with Troy when I noticed the Mexican woman in the trailer next to theirs put some cash in a tin can above her washer. I could see her clearly through the front window. A light bulb flashed above my little criminal head.

They were a group of four middle-aged Mexicans, probably in the country illegally, all working and saving their money towards something better. I deduced as much after I found several stashes of cash and coins in their trailer and rummaged through their stuff. I'd recruited my cousins Billy Wayne, Troy and Tonya to help me break in without telling them about the tin can. I went straight to it once we gained entry, then found the other stash spots in a mattress and speaker in the bedrooms. There wasn't much of anything else worth stealing besides the money and a pair of cowboy boots that Troy coveted, so I gave each of my cousins some money and admonished them to keep their mouth shut.

The cowboy boots got us busted. I didn't think Tory was stupid enough to wear them outside, but he did and the Mexicans saw him. I'd hid the money, about \$400, under my trailer until the heat died down, but it never really did. Junior was evicted on the spot and he moved to Bridge City, Texas. I was suspected, but my cousins didn't implicate me so the landlord couldn't take any action against my family. My dad knew I was involved, though, and he knocked the shit out of me and wouldn't let me outside. It was an indefinite punishment, but it was futile because he couldn't enforce it while he wasn't home, which was the majority of the time since he worked.

Pensacola, Florida

Summer of 1994

My dad surprised us all when he said we were moving. He had his paycheck from Bill Dee's, Steven had several hundred dollars, my mom cashed Tammie's \$400 SSI check and my dad shook me down and found about \$300. I asked, "Where are we moving, Dad?"

"I ain't decided yet, but together we got over \$1300. Should be enough to get us the hell away from here."

We loaded our truck with our dogs and the things we valued most then headed East on I-10. We stopped at our family's places in Beaumont and then Orange, and for a

moment I thought we might try to find a place in one of those cities, but we got back in the truck and crossed the Louisiana state line. Somewhere around New Orleans I asked if we'd find a place there? My dad said, "Naw, I'm thinking maybe Alabama or Florida. Be nice to live by the ocean . . . We'll settle down wherever feels right, okay?"

We spent the night in Gulfport/Biloxi, Mississippi. The city was sparkling with its casinos, and it was pretty down by the Gulf with all of the fancy boats. Dad wanted to keep going, though, and we drove on into Alabama and the city of Mobile. Mom had relatives there, people she hadn't seen in over 35 years, and we took a break at their place while she caught up with them. They were old country folks, simple people without a television set. It's no wonder I grew bored quickly there and couldn't wait to get back in the truck.

Dad stopped at a truck stop/diner in Pensacola, Florida. We bought burgers and drinks and ate out by the truck while my dad flipped through a local newspaper and Steven walked the dogs. We rode around the city about 45 minutes before my dad parked in front of a trailer park and asked us what we thought of the place? The trailers looked to be in good shape with fenced in yards, the roads were smooth asphalt and there were lots of nice shade trees. The rent was cheap, they paid all the utilities including free cable television. We loved it. Dad said we could pay a month's rent and if we wanted to move deeper into Florida later we'd leave once next month's rent was due.

Steven and Dad wanted to crank up the tree service, at least until my dad could find a steady job. We had the saws and all the gear and a good truck; all we needed was to establish ourselves as a Florida tree company. All that required was \$20 worth of business cards from a printing shop that boldly stated "Pioneer Trees of Florida" with our phone number and address.

I landed us our first job in Florida, a \$350 dead oak tree that didn't require a haul-off. In Houston we could've gotten over \$500 for that same job, but we soon discovered that the cost of living was higher in Florida and people weren't as willing to pay for tree work as in Texas. Still, we lined up a month's worth of jobs and had plans for the upcoming hurricane season. Hurricanes hit Florida almost every year and there's good money in the clean-up, as Steven, James Terry and John learned when hurricane Andrew hit Florida the previous year. In two weeks time Steven alone made several thousand dollars. Of course he blew it all on drugs and strippers and didn't have a penny to his name when he returned to Texas, but we knew we could do clean-up work and rake in the cash if a hurricane hit. My dad said we'd be the attorneys of the tree business, but rather than chase ambulances at the scene of accidents we'd chase hurricanes.

We ran out of pot a week into our stay in Florida. Knowing that every trailer park had at least one pothead living in it, Steven and I decided to take a walk through ours. We met a couple in their mid-30's who smoked. They said they had a connection to score quarter ounces for \$60! I was blown away. In Houston I could get a full ounce for \$40-

\$50, and it was quality bud. We didn't have any other options since all the weed in Florida was expensive, so we bought a quarter.

The woman, I want to say her name was Janice or Joyce, had a couple of kids close to my age. They lived with their biological father on Gulf Breeze, an island just off the coast with a five mile bridge connecting it to the mainland, but spent a lot of time with their mom at our trailer park. Her son's name was Mark and he was a year younger than me, and his sister, Jenny, was a year my senior. They both had long brown hair, like their mother, and were a couple of skater kids.

Mark and Jenny became my best friends in Florida. They showed me around the city and introduced me to all of their friends, mostly stoner/surfer/skater types. Their dad was a lawyer who owned a badass two story beach house on stilts. Jenny used his credit cards to pay for the neverending party we had the entire time I knew them, and she even bought me some clothes for school. Mark and I would be in the 8th grade together that Fall and he promised I'd love it at his school. Apparently he had quite the female following at school, so said Jenny.

Jenny was gorgeous with her tanned skin and sexy curves, but she was unfortunately off limits since she had a boyfriend, an awesome guitarist named Joker who often hung out with us at their place down by the beach. But they had a friend named Sarah, a cute blonde chick who usually wore cut-off shorts, tank tops and sandals. She wasn't hooked up with anyone and, Jenny once joked, I always seemed to find myself seated next to her.

One night down by the beach is still beautifully etched in memory. A huge bonfire illuminated the bright, white sand and deep blue Gulf of Mexico. The tide was rising and a cool breeze blew through my hair as I sat next to Sarah. We were passing a joint of good ganja back and forth, teenagers in shorts and bikinis were laughing and hanging out all around us and a boom box was cranked up to "Black Hole Sun" by Soundgarden. The wind picked up, bringing with it the salty smell of the gulf, and Sarah pressed her body closer to mine. I wrapped an arm around her and she placed her hand on mine, showing me her stainless steel ring. "You see that?" A couple were intertwined in the 69 position on the ring. How did I fail to notice that before? Sarah smiled at me and said, "I'm all about that right there".

That night we all partied at the beach house, smoked some of the best weed I've ever had and played strip poker. I felt like I was in paradise.

Sadly, our stay in Florida ended after just a few months. We were on a tree job in a neighborhood of Naval officers when Steven accidentally rammed the truck into the side of a Navy captain's car. My brother was attempting to back the truck up to our trailer, but the gear shaft slipped into neutral and the truck rolled into the captain's car as he passed by. Rather than pay a fine or spend a few nights in jail (he had prior tickets from Houston that showed up on the cop's computer), they decided to leave Florida and move

back to Texas. My dad was homesick and wanted to live around his family more than anything else, I believe.

Today we all agree that leaving Florida was the worst thing we could've done. I wasn't out stealing while there, I was enjoying the beach and the company of my new friends. We were making money in the tree business, but we packed and left Sometimes I wonder what life would've been had we stayed in Florida?

Channelview-Eugene's House on Woodforest

Late Summer of 1994

Everyone knew Eugene and Jessie's house on Woodforest Boulevard because it had the big weeping willow out front with lawn chairs under it. We liked to sit in their yard and get stoned watching the traffic pass by. Those who knew us honked and shouted at us and we waved and screamed back.

After we decided to return to Texas Mom called Gene and she invited us to live with them until we could get back on our feet. Joe had just gotten out of juvenile detention so it was cool to catch up with him. I told everyone how amazing Florida was, and for once my stories didn't need embellishment.

Besides Colleen driving me crazy sun-bathing in the tiniest bikinis I ever saw in their backyard, there were two incidents that stand out from our brief stay with Eugene on Woodforest. First, I stole Amanda's father's guns. Amanda was Heather Hanson's cousin and she lived just down the street from Eugene. She let us hang out at her house and relax in their Jacuzzi in the backyard while her parents were at work. I found a 9mm Berreta, a .380 Luger and a 1-shot .45 in her parents' closet and easily smuggled them outside.

I went to Juan and Ernesto's in Cloverleaf to sell the guns. They were both gone, but a kid named Harley bought the 9mm from me for \$200 cash and an 8-ball of coke. I left and returned later hoping to sell the .380 and ran into Charlie Morgan. Charlie was 6'-4" and over 250 pounds. He was perhaps five years older than me, and his daddy owned a lot of rental property in Cloverleaf. His sister Tomisina used to be Colleen's best friend and was so hot that she was in Playboy in the late 1990's. Charlie sold weed and coke and thought he was hardcore gangsta. He was an abrasive asshole and I never liked the dude. My cousin Chucky sold him some diamonds that Charlie later claimed were fake and he wanted his money back. That day at Juan's he asked me, "Where's your stupid ass cousin Chucky?"

"In Corpus Christi, last I heard."

"That sonofabitch owes me."

"Good luck with that," I laughed. "Know anyone looking for a .380 Luger?"

I handed him the gun, without the clip. He acted offended and told me to give him the clip. Reluctantly, I did. I wanted \$200 for the gun. He dropped the gun in one pocket and pulled out a \$20 dollar bill from the other. He tried to hand it to me and I let it fall to the ground. "Fuck no, Charlie! What kinda shit is that? I want \$200 or whatever that is in dope!"

"Since Chucky is your cousin you owe me. This makes us even."

Charlie wouldn't listen to reason. There wasn't a damn thing I could do at that moment because he had my gun. I'd wasted the last bullet from the .45 so it was useless. My friend Kurt had driven me over there and I had to get back into his car empty handed. I caught up with Charlie about 6 months later in his daddy's Cadillac with Ricky and Jose Romero. I unloaded about five rounds from Jessie's .38 into his trunk, not trying to hit anyone, just fuck the car up, and he burned rubber down the street.

The other incident I will never forget from our stay at Eugene's involved that .45 l-shot pistol. I had it hidden in our truck, under the front seat. We'd rented our truck a couple years back and stopped making payments on it when we moved to Florida. I was in Eugene's livingroom one day and decided to step outside for some reason just in time to catch a repo man hooking our truck to his wrecker truck!

I screamed at the top of my lungs and broke for our truck. All I could think about was the pistol under the seat. I yanked the door open and dove into the truck just as the wrecker pulled out of the driveway. The door to our truck was wide open as the wrecker drove down Woodforest with me in the cab. I got the pistol and secured it in my pocket, knowing they'd have to stop sometime.

Jessie, my father and brother were right behind us in another car. Apparently they heard my scream. When the repo men pulled into the parking lot of the Kroger super market at the intersection of Woodforest and Beltway 8, I jumped out of our truck. I ran to the driver's side of the wrecker just as he rolled the window down and punched him right in his face as hard as I could. My brother restrained me and the repo man explained to my dad that he had to take the truck. We were without wheels and in a real bind, once again.

Bridge City, Texas-Tenney's Apartments

Late Summer of 1994

The little town of Bridge City is squeezed between Orange and Port Arthur, Texas and gets its name because you can't get to it without crossing a bridge. It's easily my favorite town in Texas, and I was lucky enough to live there twice and party there countless times. It's a hub for college kids who love to party and have plenty of money to

do it with. It's not that there are any clubs or spectacular sights in Bridge City; it's really just a small town that you'll miss if you blink, but everywhere I went there were lots of young people doing lots of drugs, playing rock music and partying their hearts out.

We lived there for a couple of weeks the first time, in an apartment with Junior's family. John and Michelle also lived there at that time. I think he was transitioning from Marcy's place in Orange to his house in Orange and was still building his drug clientele. Most of the time we lived at the Tenney apartments I hung out with John, helping him weigh out and sell dope, staying stoned 24/7, flirting with all the older chicks that came through to buy weed from him. I remember trying to impress a group of co-eds one night by slamming Budweisers. Alice in Chains played in the background as I got as drunk as I've ever been in my life. I threw up all over John's floor and the next thing I recall is being back at Junior's and my dad telling me to kick my feet as if I were swimming, it would help stop the spinning in my head. I've never been a big drinker and that night explains why.

Our stay at Junior's in Bridge City was cut short because, once again, I couldn't stop shitting in my own backyard. I befriended the apartment owner's grandson, a boy close to my age that lived in the house next to the complex. He was about to begin the 8th grade and he laced me up on what to expect at Bridge City Junior High. He invited me over to his house to lift weights in the garage and play video games in his room. He tried to impress me by showing me his grandfather's .44 revolver. It was a beauty, and it was a big mistake on his part. I went to use his bathroom before I left that day and unlocked the window.

I bided my time for a few days, until I was sure no one was home, then I snuck over the fence and through their bathroom window to steal the gun. I took it to John and asked him to give me a half pound of weed or \$250 for it. He said he was headed to Houston that night to score 20 pounds of weed and would give me the pot when he returned, so I have him the gun.

I was busted before John could leave Bridge City. Someone saw me enter the house through the window and called the manager of the apartments. A crowd of people were in front of Junior's apartment when I walked up and I was told to produce the gun or the police would be called. Thankfully, John hadn't already left! I returned the gun and the manager told Junior to get rid of me and my family or everyone would be out on the streets. Dad called Uncle Bill.

Vidor, Texas-Uncle Bill's House

Fall of 1994

Uncle Bill lived in the little country town of Vidor, between Orange and Beaumont, Texas on I-10. It's infamous for being a racist town, the Klan capitol of Texas. Back in the early 1990's the town made national news after they built some housing projects and bused in some black folks from Beaumont. Violence erupted between the newcomers and the ignorant protestors who "only want to keep our town clean." I recall at least one person being murdered, a poor black woman, and there was a sign that read "Don't let the sun set on your nigger ass!" just down the road from the projects. I recall driving past those projects years later, when the violence and tension had long been quelled, and seeing it surrounded by a barbed wire fence. It looked more like a prison than an apartment complex.

The truth is I didn't perceive Vidor as a racist town. Uncle Bill said, "Vidor is not racist. Sure, there are a few closet Klansmen, ignorant white trash, but generally this is a friendly country town that embraces all cultures. Heck, just go down to the high school after class and see all the younguns dressed like they're black, listening to rap music." His step daughter, Monique, was a guest on Gerwaldo after the racial violence at the housing projects and she defended the people of Vidor as being good country folks and denounced the horrendous actions of a few ignorant protestors.

Uncle Bill lived on the dead-end of Cherry Street, a gravel road off in the sticks. He had a nice 3 bedroom house with a pretty good sized pasture out back with a stable and a few horses. The country singer Clay Walker grew up right across the street from Uncle Bill's place. Uncle Bill said the Vidor police had to put up a barricade at the end of the street to keep all of the excited teenage fans from crowding his house when he came down to move his momma up to Nashville, Tennessee.

I'd never ridden a horse until we moved in with Uncle Bill. Monique helped me saddle one of their horses and taught me how to ride as her husband Roger, a city boy who didn't want any part of a horse, sat on the back porch laughing at me. It's a lot of work, getting a horse ready to ride, but the freedom I felt riding through Bill's pasture made it worth it. I pretended to be a cowboy out in the woods with a .22 rifle, looking for supper. The one time that I fired a shot atop the horse it startled him and he threw me off!

Uncle Bill helped us get on our feet. Not only did he allow us to live with him for free for about a month, he loaned us his Ford pick up truck to go out and do tree work in. We found work in and around Vidor and before long we got our own truck, a good Chevy with a 350 engine, and a trailer to haul loads off with. In no time we were able to move into our own place out on Highway 105 in Vidor.

There's one memory from living with Uncle Bill that I'll never forget. They were squares so we couldn't get high anywhere around their property. We had to go visit John when we wanted to get high. I did meet a dude a few years older than me, a huge country boy named Jimmy that I rode the bus with, who smoked weed. He invited me over to his trailer to get drunk and stoned with him and his uncle on the weekends. They grew their own smoke in their backyard. One Friday night I was at Jimmy's hanging out with him and his uncle, listening to Hank Williams Jr. While most of the folks in Vidor weren't racists, these boys certainly were. After about a 12 pack of beer Jimmy got all excited. His eyes lit up as he asked me, "Lil Robert, you wanna come to Beaumont with me and my uncle? We gone have a good ol time fightin niggers!"

"Um, sorry Big Jimmy, but I promised my brother, I'd be home by 9pm and ride out to Orange with him. Maybe next weekend?"

Those were a couple of the craziest country boys I ever met.

Vidor-Highway 105

Fall-Winter of 1994

We were happy to have our own place again, to get our tree service back off the ground. We rented a nice 2 bedroom trailer nestled in the woods on a hill out in the country. Junior and his bunch moved into a house in Vidor to help us out with the tree business. The problem was that there wasn't a lot of work to be found in Vidor. Most country folks don't want to pay others for work they can do themselves. But there were new neighborhoods all over the Golden Triangle where people would gladly pay for tree work. John's tree business was flourishing and he had jobs lined up for several months, so when we needed work he passed them onto us, or we collaborated with him and did the really big jobs.

Things were looking up for us, though. We had a phone line installed, we got new furniture and cable TV, and my probation was transferred to Vidor. We'd already had it transferred once to Pensacola, but the people at the Justice Department in Houston were very accommodating and understanding.

I started the 8th grade at Vidor Junior High and became an instant celebrity. A lot of the kids thought I was cool as ice water because I was from the big city of Houston, where all the bright lights and gang members were. Everyone at Vidor was white except for about 10 black kids and perhaps 15 Mexicans, but everyone got along with them. There was an allure amongst the student body at Vidor for the gangsta lifestyle and, even though I wasn't exactly "gangsta", (I dressed like a skater) I grew up in Houston and lots of kids wanted to hear stories about my life there.

Everything seemed to flow smoothly at first. I enjoyed my classes, passed them all with ease, met some cool people and even had a sweet country girlfriend. The trouble began after the principle saw me with my arms wrapped around my girlfriend in front of the cafeteria before class one morning. She had her back pressed against my chest and our hands were together around her stomach. The principal called me to his office and said he'd heard the rumors about me being a gang member from Houston. He said he'd reviewed my record and knew all about my convictions, that he wouldn't tolerate that type of behavior in his school. I got upset because, in my mind, I hadn't done anything wrong. I was not a gang member! I smarted off to him and he suspended me for three days for "inappropriate contact with another student".

Over the next month or so I stayed in trouble. I thought I noticed a subtle change in my teachers after that first suspension, as if they'd been talking about me, and I just felt like they were out to get me. They drew a hard line with me and I repeatedly crossed it, and my grades began to suffer. My flippant attitude got me sent to the principal's office almost daily.

Finally, the principal placed me in alternative school at the high school. Why they thought alternative school was some kind of punishment, I don't know. At the alternative section of Vidor High school I attended classes from 11am to 3pm, all of the teachers were laid back, you could work at your own pace and if you needed help the teachers had plenty of time to work with you with only about 12 kids per class. As long as we completed our assignments we were free to do whatever we wanted in class, including sleep or play games. It was there that I first learned to play chess with a group of boys from the high school. I really enjoyed the game, the way it engages the mind, the war-like strategies you utilize.

I met a kid named Jessie Miller at Vidor junior High who later followed me to the alternative school. He dressed like a prep, but hung out with the stoners and metalheads, the group I gravitated towards in Vidor. A lot of them were in high school, just starting to drive the cars their daddy bought them, and the thing to do was cruise around town and get stoned. They'd pick me up and we'd ride around with the windows rolled up, smogging out with some good bud, listening to bands like Candlebox, Alice in Chains, Nine Inch Nails. It's not like there was much else to do in Vidor.

Most of the time we got our pot from Cousin John. He lived about 30 minutes away though, and sometimes it just wasn't worth the drive. One evening I came home with Jessie and we were out of pot. Jessie told my brother and I he knew where to score half ounces for 50 bucks. It was more than what we were used to paying, but much easier than making the drive out to Orange.

My brother drove Jessie and me to the dealer's trailer. Steven gave Jessie the 50 dollars and he walked to the trailer. We noticed a black car with two country boys leave about 10 minutes later, then Jessie returned and said the dudes in the car went to pick up the weed.

Steven was furious. He didn't like going through one middle man much less two. We waited for about 45 minutes for the black car to return before we started banging on the door of the trailer. An older couple answered and they said they didn't know anything about any weed, that their boys went to a bar in Beaumont. Jessie apologized and promised to get things straightened out, but we knew he'd been burned.

We dropped Jessie off at his house and went home to break the news to my father. He'd been drinking and was waiting on us to get high. After he heard our story he said he wanted to pay those boys a visit. My father, brother and I returned to the trailer. The black car was still gone. We waited for about 15 minutes, hoping to catch the dudes in the car, until my father finally snapped. He jumped out of the truck and grabbed a bottle. He filled it with gasoline from a can we used to gas up our saws, stuffed the bottle with a rag and lit it on fire. He chunked the bottle towards the trailer and, thankfully, the rag fell out as the bottle flew harmlessly through a window. We fled the scene.

A week or so later we stopped at the gas station to gas up after a tree job and the black car was parked at the gas pumps. Steven said, "That's them boys' goddamned car that burned us!"

My brother and father walked towards the entrance of the store. One of the dudes who burned us stepped out of the store and right into my brother's fist. They fought for a minute as my father chased the other dude around the side of the store. No one was in the idly black car so I opened the door and was about to drive off in it, but Steven stopped me and told me to get back into our truck. He said, "We proved our point, now let's get the fuck out of here." Before I got back into our truck I sliced a couple of the tires on the black car.

Part Time Dealin'

Cousin John was rising fast in the dope game in late 1994. He had a nice white house in The Cove, an all-white neighborhood in Orange, Texas, where he sold weed and coke. He made frequent trips to Houston to buy large quantities of marijuana at discounted prices, then he'd break it down and make a killing distributing it in the Golden Triangle, where the prices for dope skyrocketed compared to Houston.

One Friday night I was over at John's hanging out, jamming out on his guitars with him, helping him sell dope and making a little cash on the side. I had about \$150 in my pocket and I bought a quarter pound of weed from him. He and Michelle were preparing to make a dope run to Houston where they'd stay the weekend and see the Pantera concert with James Terry and his wife Sheryl. John said I could sell my weed to his customers at his house while he was gone, but I had to first sell the little weed he was leaving behind.

Chucky and I were holding the fort down while John was gone. By Saturday night I'd sold out of everything except for the half ounce we were smoking out of. I had over \$350 in my pocket and had plans on buying a half pound from John when he returned so I could do it all over again the next time he made a trip to H-Town.

While John was away Chucky broke his television. He was drunk in the livingroom, slam dancing and acting like an overall idiot, and he bumped into the entertainment center. John knocked Chucky around when he got home, but he still had the problem of having no television. He could sell some weed or coke to get a new one, but I asked him to just sell me the 9mm pistol he had that I wanted for \$300 and he could use that money for a new TV. He agreed and I went home with my new gun.

Once again I made the mistake of showing my dad a pistol. He asked me where I got it and I explained everything. He let me keep it for a couple of days, probably thinking there wasn't much harm I could cause out in the sticks, then he took it from me and returned it to John. John gave him \$50 in food stamps and a half ounce of weed for it! John tried to give him more, but my dad wouldn't accept it since John was always giving us money and weed to smoke. My father again told me I had no business with a pistol and warned me about him catching me with another one. No problem, that was the last one I ever showed him.

Bridge City-Trailer on the Highway

Winter of 1994 - Early 1995

I can't remember why we left Vidor, but I'm pretty sure we moved to Bridge City again to be closer to John. We rented a small 2 bedroom trailer on a three trailer lot next to the highway between Bridge City and Orange. We couldn't have been there more than 6 weeks; plenty enough time for me to stir up trouble at school.

For those people who think Vidor is a racist town they ought to check out Bridge City. We had just one non-white student at Bridge City Junior High, a Mexican boy who actually lived in Orange. But the lack of minorities had nothing to do with why I loved going to school there. Rather, it was the large contingent of lesbian Goth chicks and how open they were with their sexuality. I'll never forget the first time I saw two girls Frenching each other in the hallway. I couldn't concentrate the rest of the day!

Since John lived so close to us I went over to his place most days. He always had a tray full of shake under his coffee table and I took the liberty of rolling a Marlboro Red box of pinner joints from it about once a week. I took the joints to school and sold them for \$2 a piece. One of the girls that I sold a few joints to got caught with them and she snitched on me. I denied everything when the principal called me to his office. I told him she likely

lied on me because I rejected her when she asked me out, said she wasn't my type. He looked skeptical. Without much to go on besides the girl's word, all he could do was send me home for the day, as a precaution I guess.

I passed the bike rack on the way off of the premises. I noticed a sweet GT Vertigo bicycle with a weak combination lock 'securing' it to the rack. These kids obviously didn't have any idea about security. I easily busted the lock by stepping up on the locking mechanism and forcing all of my weight down. I rode home in style.

Later that day the principal called my mother and asked if she saw me with the bike. She looked up at me on the couch and stared daggers at me and I knew what the call was about instantly. What I didn't anticipate was her telling the principal the truth! Fortunately, the principal didn't call the police; he did suspend me for three days after Mom brought the bike back.

When I returned to school I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I walked through the hallways. I'd already heard through a friend that the bike belonged to a football player, and the dude was talking shit about me. I'd seen the kid around and just knew I'd have my hands full since he was about 75 pounds heavier than me. He approached me at my locker and I braced myself. I could immediately tell he was nervous when he stuttered, "Ya-you the one stole my bike?"

"I didn't know who it belonged to. I just needed a ride home after ol girl ratted me out. My bad, man."

Surprisingly, he relaxed a little and shrugged it all off, said he thought I knew who owned the bike. He seemed relieved that I provided him an out. I presume my big city reputation stole some of his confidence. He shook my hand and said it was cool. Later that day I was hanging out with him and his friends down the street, riding their bikes and getting them stoned.

The End of The Road

Channelview-227½ Dell Dale

Early 1995-August 1995

The inconsistency of the tree service is largely to blame for our return to Channelview. It was wintertime and jobs were scarce, so my dad called up Gary Wilborn and asked if he could have his job back. Gary never objected when my father wanted to pursue his tree service ambitions, and he always welcomed him back at Bill Dee's.

The last place I ever lived in the freeworld was 227½ Dell Dale in Channelview. Eugene and Jessie had visited us in Vidor and Bridge City and once they heard we were moving back to Houston they told us about a vacant 2 bedroom trailer where they were living.

The trailer park is about 150 yards from 1-10 on Dell Dale, right across from the Pink store where they sold the best chopped barbeque I ever had for \$1 a sandwich. An old, blonde hippy chick named Memory Layne, who ironically couldn't remember five minutes ago after a life of drug and alcohol abuse, lived in a white house at the front entrance. There are huge potholes in the gravel driveway and a couple of different sets of apartment buildings on the right side of the road as you enter. Just beyond the apartment there are a line of about 10 trailers stacked to the right, side by side, with two lone trailers at the end of the driveway.

We moved into the very last trailer. We had a huge front yard, a chain link fence dividing our yard from the woods. We built Razor and Sizzor a doghouse next to the fence and chained them to large oak trees, and we set up a table under the shade trees by the front porch where my father and his buddies could hang out each day after work. It felt like a nice little setup for us.

Joe Day was living with Jessie and Eugene three trailers down from us. We'd spoken several times after he got out, when Eugene was still living on Woodforest, but we never got to have a heart-to-heart because he was always on the move. He was always laconic and reserved, but his time in detention seemed to make him even more distant. He wasn't running the streets anymore, wasn't out stealing and robbing and everyone was proud of him. I finally got to talk to him alone at my trailer on Dell Dale and he said he felt like he had been ruining his life before, that being away from his friends and family sorta woke him up. I thought I understood what he was saying. Or at least I wanted to understand, but I later learned that until you actually experience what he went through then it's impossible to truly understand.

Joe still smoked pot and drank occasionally, and, as I found out about two weeks after we moved in, he wasn't opposed to taking a trip down LSD Road with us! Joe, Eugene and I took three hits of double dipped Beavis and Butthead acid one afternoon. We were hanging out in front of their trailer with Abraham Soto, a 20 year old Hispanic dude who was a genius on the guitar. He played music for us while we tripped balls, chain smoked cigarettes and drank orange juice. Just as the acid started to kick in we were laughing at anything and Abraham asked us if we were high or something? I told him we were tripping acid and he started messing with us. He grabbed handfuls of sand and our eyes followed his fists as he made bird and jet sounds, then he's slowly open his fists and everything turned into sand with the echo of his maniacal laughter!

The same came from the pile in front of Jessie bedroom window where he had his friend with a dump truck unload it. Jessie was all about keeping the trailer park clean and well-maintained. We helped him trim the trees and wash the trailers, cut the grass and clean the windows. The sand was for the potholes that we later filled. This particular night, while we were on acid, Joe, Eugene and I found ourselves atop the pile of sand playing it in like little kids. I was utterly fascinated by the sand, its mystical dimensions, the magical

kingdoms the three of us built that night. I remember when we first started playing in it my dad was hanging out at the table in front of our place and the sun was still out. We'd gotten totally lost in our fantasies and the next thing I recall my dad was yelling from his truck at us at 5:30am on the way to work, "You boys been out there all night playing in that sand?"

Yes, we had been, and we'd remain there for several more hours building tunnels and sand castles, preparing for the inevitable war we'd wage on each other!

At first, life at the trailer park on Dell Dale was somewhat reminiscent of the times in Cloverleaf when we all first met. We cut trails into the woods beside the trailer park and built a clubhouse out there. Nearly every day we were out there in the woods, enjoying nature and each other's company. We even took pellet guns out there and shot each other during our wargames. Eugene was always an easy target because he had no grace about him as he tried to hide. Be still for a few minutes and you'll hear him tripping over branches and rummaging through the bush. In fact, it wasn't until we lived in the Dell Dale trailer park together that he finally cut out the Bee-Bee that I put in his neck a few years before in the woods between the Beltway and Cloverleaf!

Mom enrolled me at Alice Johnson junior High, where I completed the 8th grade that year. They stuck me in alternative classes on day one after the principal reviewed my extensive record and noticed I was on probation. I went to class with a group of 20 other kids from 10am-2pm in a classroom behind the school, sectioned off from the normal students. Again we worked on assignments at our own pace, the teacher was laid back, and the rest of the day was ours once our work was completed. The teacher said once all the assignments were completed from the curriculum of our grade level, we would immediately pass to the next grade. Thus, I completed the 8th grade by late April that year. I was informed that I was eligible for alternative school at the high school the next Fall, where Eugene was already attending classes, and if I took care of my business there I could complete the 12th grade in just over two years time. That was certainly the path I planned on taking.

Pulling My Own Weight

We had a lot of traffic in the trailer park. Jessie and Eugene kept a crowded trailer, Amy Perry and Monkey were living in the apartment up front and they had lots of company, plus there were three dope dealers living at 227½ Dell Dale and they all had a steady flow of people. After I moved in dudes like Dough Boy, Richard "Lips", skinhead Kurt, and many others liked to hang out at my place, and they often brought carloads of youngsters with them, again, it was a constant party at our trailer park.

Of the three dealers in the park I only knew of two...at first. There was a Mexican in the second set of apartments who was buddies with Ernesto Senior and he sold cocaine by the gram. Jessie was selling weed but I didn't know where he was getting it from. He was secretive about it when I asked him. Then, one night, I watched him leave the old school Mexican's trailer just a couple of trailers down from his. I walked over to Jessie's room and he was busting open a half pound of weed, weighing it out in quarter bags.

His name was Javier and he barely spoke English. He was Abraham's Uncle. I often saw him working on his red Econoline van and a white Chevy pick up in front of his trailer and had spoken to him a few times in passing. After I figured out where Jessie was scoring from I decided to pay Javier a visit the next time I saw him outside and get to know him a little better. With the little Spanish I do know and the little English he knew we were able to maintain good conversation. He was in his early 40's and originally from Monterey, Mexico. He'd brought his wife and kids up to Texas in search of a better life, and a part of that better life, I later learned, was him driving weed up from the Valley a couple times a month. I'm talking several hundred pounds per trip. He worked at a tire shop on Sheldon Road as a front; his money was made trafficking weed. He looked at me curiously when I first broached the topic of weed. I asked him if he smoked? "No smokey nothing cept cigar...Me selly a little sontime."

"Oh yeah?" I played it off. "I'm looking to selly a little myself. Got a lot of people looking to buy some, just looking for a good deal..."

Javier stared at me for a moment, mulling it over. He told me to wait there and he disappeared into his trailer. He returned with a quarter pound of weed in a Ziplock bag and handed it to me. "It's good sheet, Wedo. Is weigh out mucho bueno. You gimme \$100."

"Uh, I don't have any money right now, but..."

"Ta bueno. You pay when you selly. No problem."

I could break a quarter pound into four ounces and each ounce into four \$20 sacks in the Channelview market. I built a nice clientele from selling to people in the trailer park and flipped a quarter pound in less than a week on average. Soon, I branched out and started selling cocaine and a little LSD on the side. All I had to do was kick back at the front of my trailer with my friends, stash the dope in the broken down car by our place, and people would show up looking for drugs. If I wasn't home, my mom or Joe, who was alternating from my trailer and Jessie's, would make the sell for me and leave my money in my tin can. In no time I was flipping more dope than anyone in the trailer park. Jessie later got mad at me because I would sell to his clientele when he wasn't home. What was I supposed to do when they came to me looking for dope and he wasn't home? He thought I should just tell them to return later, but people didn't like waiting for their high. It became an issue between us that following summer.

By this point my father didn't trip on me selling drugs. Steven was working at a pipeyard and he and my father's checks combined didn't pay all the bills. Whatever money I could come up with helped immensely. As long as I wasn't out robbing and stealing, he didn't mind me selling a little weed. He didn't know about the coke and LSD, I don't think.

What my father didn't approve of was the flood of people knocking at our door at all hours of the night looking for dope. An old dope fiend banged on our door late one night, just as my father was about to crash out, and he threw the guy off the front porch! I told my customers not to knock on my door after 7pm...no exceptions!

The problem I had with selling cocaine was, oftentimes, I did my own supply. I discovered the hard way that you can't do any if you intend to sell it, at least not until you sell everything you plan on getting rid of. Let's say I got an 8-ball and broke it into \$20 papers. If I set x amount of papers to the side to sell and y amount was my personal stash to snort, I had to sell the x pile first, otherwise I ALWAYS dipped into the stuff to sell. It got so bad that I'd snort into my profit every single time.

Steven used to do coke with me and my friends on Dell Dale. We'd wait until our father would crash out and I'd break us out some lines. I would tell them that the pile of coke I raked out would be all we'd do. The rest had to be sold. Yet after the pile was gone and everyone was gone, Steven invariably asked me to break out one more line. We'd be laying there fighting the white dragon in the dark, trying to get to sleep, and he'd call my name to see if I was awake, knowing I still was. "Robert...Robert! I know your ass is still awake 'cause I'm zinging my ass off over here! Let's just do one more line and we'll go to bed. I promise."

No matter how many times I told him no, we ended up doing one more line. One more line turned into two and I ended up doing everything up with him. The coke business turned out to be a disaster for me.

Occasionally I sold crack. A dude in his early 20's named Jason, from California, taught me how to rock powdered coke up with heat, a little water and baking soda. There was more money in crack, but I soon learned that it was more trouble than it was worth.

Before I learned how to rock coke up I got burned by a Mexican from Sterling Green. He was a gangbanger named Pelon and I met him at the Spaghetti Bowl, a drainage ditch where I used to skateboard. We got to talking and I told him I sold coke, and he said he sold crack. He asked if I wanted to trade a gram of coke for crack and I said sure. I gave him my pager number and we talked later and set up a rendezvous.

My friend Kurt was about 25 years old and a Hammerskin skinhead. He wore blue jeans or cutoff shorts with a chain wallet, white supremacist t-shirts and Doc Marten's. He drove me to meet Pelon at a carwash in Woodforest. We picked Pelon up and dropped him off at a street corner in Sterling Green. He said he had to go get the dope from his house. I watched which house he walked into and we made the exchange, then Kurt and I left.

Kurt lived in the middle of cracktown, in an all black neighborhood. In spite of his professed views, he was cool with the dealers in his apartments, getting high and partying with them many nights. We went to his place after meeting with Pelon so he could shower and get ready for a night out. Afterward, he asked me to break out the rock, he wanted to do a hit. He got his pipe and brillo pad and I broke him off a piece to smoke. He lit the pipe and the “dope” turned black. It was wax. I’d been burned and I was steaming hot.

Kurt had a .22 automatic rifle. I made him drive me back to the house that Pelon entered. I knocked on the door and no one answered, but there was a car in the driveway. A brand new car. Angry, I sprayed the car with bullets and we raced out of Sterling Green.

I got out of the crack business because I couldn’t have the crack heads coming to my place. They drew bigtime heat. Once, I was sitting on my dad’s recliner with my girlfriend on my lap and a trailer full of friends. This filthy old man with long, dirty hair and beard dropped by. He smelled like he’d just crawled out of a dumpster. He was shaking badly as he kneeled before me and asked for a \$20 rock. He repeatedly called me “sir,” and thanked me when I broke him off a piece of dope. I imagined my dad walking in and finding that dude in our place; all hell would break loose, so I put a stop to the crack business.

Bad Company

By the summer of 1995 I was hooked on cocaine again. Almost every dollar I made selling drugs went towards my habit. Around this time Baby G had started hanging out at my place, and Chucky moved in with us. Baby G was 13 years old, but he’d been raised by thugs since he was 9 years old; plus, his dad sold weed and meth in Channelview for years, so he was accustomed to my lifestyle and had some street smarts.

When the drugs ran out we hit the street to make money, to feed our addictions. Kurt drove us around at first. We did any and everything to make money. It started with stealing diesel tires from parked rigs to get a quick \$100, but it evolved into burglaries, auto theft, purse snatching and Zuluing dope dealers. You tell yourself that you can stop doing coke at any time, that this bump will be your last, but once you start chasing the white dragon the way we did that summer you’ll do almost anything to stay high.

Every group has a natural leader. Though Chucky and Kurt were the oldest of our group, everyone followed my lead and trusted my instincts. When I told Kurt to pull over at a motel and wait for someone that looked worth robbing, he never questioned me, nor the target I decided upon. If I told Chucky and Baby G to be my eyes while I stole a car from a parking lot, I trusted that they’d remain in their positions and alert me at the first sign of trouble. Inside a house during a burglary we left when I said it was time, and we didn’t even bust into a place unless I gave it the green light.

We wreaked havoc on Houston and the Golden Triangle that summer, showing no discrimination for who or what we robbed. We hit churches and sold their music equipment for drugs. We busted into a small Mom and Pop store on the highway to John's condo in Port Arthur and ransacked the place, getting away with a few hundred in cash, several boxes of cigarettes, a few cases of beer, and a trunk full of munchies. I still have the scar on my right arm from crawling through the front entrance and having a piece of broken glass fall on my arm. Baby G once tried to snatch a purse from an old lady at a shopping center in Orange and she put a death grip on her purse and slung him to the ground! We rescued him and laughed our asses off about it. Baby G wanted go after the old lady and get her purse, but I made him get in the car; she deserved to keep her purse after that!

My father had no clue about these nocturnal activities, otherwise he'd have beaten us half to death. My mom knew I was up to no good, especially the time she caught Baby G and me in a stolen car. She cried and begged me to get rid of it and stop my bullshit. I promised I would, but again I was hopelessly entangled. I stayed up all night doing drugs and chasing after girls, jumping from party to party, robbing whoever crossed my path. Kurt finally broke away from the group, as did several others that sometimes rode with us, but Chucky und Baby G came with me as we danced with danger and ran wild and recklessly until the wheels fell off.

Ray and Jane

Not long after I moved into the trailer park on Dell Dale, Ray and Jane Yardbrough moved in the trailer next door with their two year old daughter, Roo-Roo. Ray was in his late 20's, Jane was closer to 40, and they were good country folks. Once they got settled in I found them sitting on lawn chairs in front of their trailer and introduced myself the best way I knew how: smoking a joint with them.

Ray was strung out on crack when we first met, as was Jane. I sold them a few \$20 papers of coke-before I knew how to rock it up- and Ray said, "Fuck this shit. Can you score some rock?"

Of course I could. He drove me to a crackhouse out on Clinton Drive and I got him \$200 worth of rock. In fact, part of the reason I started selling rock was because Ray was spending his money on Clinton Drive and I wanted a piece of that action.

Ray and Jane quit doing crack cold turkey. Ray knew there wasn't any future in cocaine, plus he had a couple of kids (one from another marriage) and really didn't want to waste his life chasing that high. They'd become friends with my family, Gene's family and most of the trailer park. Jane and my mom hung out most days watching soap operas and smoking weed, and Ray would get drunk with my dad and Jessie in our front yard a

lot of nights. On weekends we sometimes barbequed together. Everyone was glad they were off the crackpipe.

Several things worked to alienate Ray's family from mine. Jane had a beautiful, blond 15 year old daughter named Nicole from another marriage. Nicole came to Texas from Georgia to spend the summer of 1995 with Jane and Ray, and all of the boys who frequented the trailer park loved to flirt with her. Out of respect for Jane I didn't make any move on her. I never showed a single sign of interest, though I did see her and was attracted to her.

I guess something about me appearing uninterested, while everyone else sang her praises, made Nicole focus on me. She probably wondered if I was gay or something! Soon, she began overtly flirting with me, to the point that I couldn't help but notice her. Jane must've recognized this because she gave me the okay, basically telling me she was cool with it. So, I made Nicole my girlfriend.

Ray never said a word against it, but I could feel his disapproval. Their place was a popular hang out spot for people in the trailer park, and I recall several instances when he'd snap at her over minor things like her chores or the clothes she wore. I don't blame him, in retrospect, for disapproving of our relationship. I was the worst kind of influence, and it was wise of him to want better for his step daughter.

One afternoon, while Ray was at work, I was over at Jane's with a bunch of the boys from the trailer park. Nicole didn't get high, but I liked hanging out with Jane and getting her high, shooting the shit at her kitchen table. A little earlier my brother asked me and Joe to come over to my trailer and get high with him. He didn't want to get stoned alone. I kept putting him off every 15 minutes as he stuck his head out at our back window and yelled over to me until he snapped. Nicole was by my side, along with Joe, Eugene and Abraham, and we mocked Steven from Jane's front window. It pissed him off and he pulled his penis out and shook it at us.

I'd like to believe that he didn't see Nicole pressed against me, that he thought it was just boys, but I think he was just so angry that he didn't care who was at the window. Nicole told Jane and she became instantly incensed. She told Ray, and although he never confronted Steven, he was clearly upset with him.

Another time, after the incident with Steven, I was at Pay's with a trailer full of people getting high. As the night grew old people began to leave. Ray and Jane retreated to their bedroom to crash and finally it was just Nicole and I in the livingroom and Baby G at their kitchen table, watching television and smoking cigarettes. Nicole and I fooled around under the blanket for awhile, but she cut me off when she thought she heard a noise. She whispered that she was worried Ray would catch us and asked me to please leave. She wasn't hearing my pleas to stay, so I grabbed Baby G and we left.

No sooner did she kiss me and shut the door did Baby G reach under the back porch and pull out Jane's purse! I was furious, grabbed him and put him in a headlock. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Stealing Jane's purse?!"

"Chill out, Robert! Let me go!"

I let him go and watched him rummage through the purse. He said there wasn't anything in it of value and he threw it over the fence and into the woods. I explained that Jane was my friend and it wasn't cool to steal from her, but the damage had been done. He was my partner in crime and there wasn't much more I could do to him.

The next day Ray accused me of stealing the purse. I swore it wasn't me, that I'd never do such a thing, but he wasn't buying it, he said I wasn't welcomed at his place anymore and he warned me against seeing Nicole. She snuck around to see me when she could, but my relationship with Ray and Jane was irreparably damaged.

Running Out of Luck

After Kurt broke away from our group we needed wheels. Some nights we'd simply steal a vehicle. I'd become proficient with a Slim Jim and dent puller. By late June, though, we used Baby G's dad's car, a beat up 1980 Ford Granada, to go out joy riding and stealing...without him knowing. We'd wait until he locked himself in his bedroom, then Baby G swiped his keys and we were off into the night.

Chucky, Baby G and I were cruising down by the San Jacinto River and Market Street one night, scoping out a house we had targeted for a burglary. After Baby G made sure no one was home, we backed up to the house and forced our way inside. Inside the house, we stole television sets, VCRs, a stereo system and about 12 rifles from a gun rack. We were running in and out of the house, loading stuff into the car, when I saw a brand new Chevy step-side truck pull into the driveway next door. I stuck my head back inside the house and told them about the ruck and to get in the car fast.

I drove away and the Chevy followed us, even with the pedal to the metal the Granada barely reached 60 miles per hour! I tried to shake the Chevy by making sharp turns and driving through parking lots and down back roads, but the guy in the truck stayed right behind us the entire time. I ended up crashing the car into a ditch. I dove out of the passenger side window because the driver's side was blocked off by hedges, and Chucky followed me, we fled into someone's yard, found a patch of woods and disappeared from the scene of the crash.

James Terry lived about a mile away. Chucky and I made it to his house and broke into it. James and his family were in Port Arthur at John's house. We waited there for about 30 minutes, wondering where Baby G could be? We finally decided to chance the streets and walk back to my trailer park, about five miles down I-10.

We were exhausted once we made it to my trailer. I just knew Baby G had been caught. Would he snitch on us? I hoped not.

Suddenly, headlights illuminated my driveway. My adrenaline shot sky high at the sight of the Ford Granada pulling into the trailer park! Baby G pulled the car perhaps five feet into the park before bursting out with a rifle and aimed it at the Chevy truck! The dumbass brought them right to my trailer park! The Chevy peeled out down Dell Dale at the sight of the weapon and Baby G drove the car down to my trailer.

Baby G said he couldn't leave his daddy's car in a ditch, said his old man would kill him. He somehow managed to back the car out of the ditch-while the Chevy idled by at a safe distance- and then he tried to elude the guy for about an hour by driving through Channelview. Realizing that was a futile plan, he drove to my trailer park. We quickly unloaded the car, hiding most of the stolen stuff in the woods, and I stashed the rifles behind Eugene's trailer.

Baby G drove his dad's car back to his apartments, just across I-10. He returned and we devised a plan. I didn't want to leave all that stolen property in the trailer park. We decided to walk over to Baby G's apartments and try to steal a vehicle, then use it to move the stolen stuff to James Terry's house. We had to get a move on before the Chevy showed up with the law.

The guy in the Chevy was the son of the homeowners we burgled. After Baby G pulled the gun on him he drove over to the pink store and waited a bit for Baby G to leave. He then followed Baby G to his apartments, sure that Baby G was unaware of him behind him, and determined that the Granada was from there. He called the police and reported the crime from the pay phone at the apartments. Perhaps in our fatigue we failed to snap when we saw the flashing lights at Baby G's apartments because we figured the police's presence was unrelated to us and walked to the back of the complex to wait for them to leave before stealing a vehicle. Afterall, it was a common sight, cops at those apartments.

We were sitting on the staircase when several officers ran down on us and arrested us. They placed us in the back of a police car as they raided Baby G's apartment. His father was found masturbating to a porno with a pile of meth on the table and a couple pounds of weed in the closet. He was also arrested. The cops took us back to my trailer park and we watched as they recovered the stolen property from the woods with my father. There was nothing my father could do that night to save me: for the first time in my life I was going to jail.

Harris County Juvenile Detention Center

July 23-31, 1995

Chucky, Baby G and I were handcuffed to a bench at the Wallisville substation for about 15 hours before we were moved. Chucky was an adult so he was taken to Harris County jail. Several months later he plea bargained for five years TDCJ time. It was the last time I ever saw Chucky. Baby G and I were taken to the juvenile detention center on West Dallas Street.

We went through the intake process together. They deloused us and showered us, gave us blue state pants and a white t-shirt. Medical personel examined us and we spoke with a psychologist and other staff while we were classified. He was 13 years old and small for his age so they put him on the 2nd floor with kids his size. I was 15 with a prior record so I was shot up to the 4th floor and placed in a cell with a big Mexican kid who was asleep, thankfully.

It was after 10pm and I was sleep deprived. I unrolled my mattress on the floor and crawled under my blanket. Hidden under the cover and truly alone for the first time all day I cried and felt sorry for myself. I had no idea what laid in store for me. I knew it was my third burglary so it couldn't be good. I cried myself to sleep thinking that I really fucked up bad this time.

My cellmate was released the next morning and I celled alone the rest of my time there. I wasn't allowed out of my cell for the first 48 hours except to shower and go to my 24 hour detention hearing, were a judge denied my release. A chaplain came to me the first day there and brought me a bible. He was kind to me as he tried to explain Christ and my need for salvation. It wasn't so much that I understood the message as I was scared, alone for the first time in my life, and I knew I needed some kind of saving. The chaplain hugged me and let me cry on his shoulder and pour my heart out to him. I said I was a bad, bad kid who never listened to my parents and teachers, who always thought I knew everything. I explained my drug addictions and my inability to shake the monsters that kept calling my name. He seemed to understand everything I told him and he said, "Why don't you just give it all to Jesus? He loves you so much that he died for you, for all of mankind."

I prayed with him and I gave myself to Jesus, just as he explained it.

I read my bible every day and tried hard to understand it. I wanted the peace and love the chaplain seemed to radiate; I wanted to break out of the lifestyle I lived. Most of all, I guess, I wanted to be free again, so I prayed to God to please give me another chance.

After my 48 hour observation period I was allowed to go to the dayroom and recreate with the other detained kids. We watched TV together, went to the gym to play basketball and volleyball, and we talked. One of the boys in my group, a white kid from Sugarland,

listened to my story and said, “You’re definitely going down, man. Three burglaries in two years? I’d say they will give you 1 year in TYC at least. Maybe six months if you cry in front of the judge.”

All the others agreed with him. I went to my room, as they called the cells there, and I cried and cried, prayed to Jesus not to let me be in jail that long. Yet in the back of my mind I just knew those boys told the truth. Some of them had already been to TYC multiple times for less. So I tried to brace myself and accept my fate. I prayed for the shortest sentence possible and promised Jesus I would do better if he made them go easy on me.

On July 31st I was taken to the courthouse. My parents and brother stood with me in front of judge Pat Shelton. They wore their best clothes and I thought they looked really nice. I tried to look strong in front of them and tell them I would be okay in TYC. I felt their love and support and was happy and proud that they were there for me. My lawyer said something about a strict new probation called S.O.S (Serious Offender Supervision) that she planned on asking the judge to consider for me, but I didn’t think he would do such a thing.

After my lawyer and the attorney for the state spoke their cases, the judge asked my parents if they had anything to say? My dad said he helped the police recover the stolen property and even brought the guns that were found in the trailer park later that day. He explained that he’s been to prison in the past and that he wanted better for me. He tried and tried to teach me right, and he expressed his hope that my time away from him had woken me up, as I professed. He begged the judge for mercy and swore he would do everything in his power to show me a better way of life.

Apparently, my father’s word reached the judge. Pat Shelton gave me 2 years of S.O.S probation. He said it would not be an easy probation to complete. 80% of those sentenced failed it within a month. If I failed I would automatically receive a 2 year term at TYC. Would I accept the terms of the probation? Yes sir, I would!

Shock is the only way to describe the turn of events that day. I was free to go home with my family right then. I just knew it was a miracle from Jesus and I explained it all to my parents and brother on the ride home and promised them I was done with the life I’d lived.

A Tragic Turn of Events

I had a new lease on life, I thought. The 8 days I spent in jail seemed to change me, make me a new person. I never again wanted to feel lonely, isolated and afraid as I had in the cell by myself. All of my friends-Joe, Eugene and Jessie- greeted me when I got home and again I vowed to them that I was straightening out my life and would focus on

finishing school. I'd had my taste of jail and it was bitter; it wasn't the life for me, I assured everyone.

Part of the stipulation to my probation was I couldn't be outside of my trailer for even one second unless I had a medical emergency or appointment. This was to be enforced for the first month of the probation. The probation officer assigned to me would also show up every day, unexpectedly, for the first month to check on me. He said if he even caught a single hair on my head outside he'd revoke me and I'd be in TYC within a week. I promised him that I would follow the rules to the letter.

Since I wasn't allowed outside I spent my days sitting in my bedroom at our front window, staring off into the trailer park. My friends would come up to the window and hang out with me there, tell me about life in the "freeworld." Life was a little boring those first few days, I confess, as I tried to keep my promise to God and read my bible everyday. Yet I was determined to fight the good fight and get myself together.

Then it all came undone at the seams. Eugene and Joe were hanging out with me in my bedroom one night. I reiterated my goals in life: stop getting high, finish school, complete my probation and stop the life of crime I'd been living. During this conversation Eugene somehow let it slip that Ray and Jessie had some of the guns from the burglary and I should just let them keep them. Huh? I'd thought my dad said he turned all of those guns over to the cops. Joe said he did, but Jessie kept a couple and Ray kept one. They could tell I was angry that Ray had one of the guns and they tried to calm me down, but it stuck to my mind like chewing gum in hair.

My father and brother were struggling mightily with the bills. I didn't have money for school clothes or school supplies. We were lucky to eat once a day. These are the things that crossed my mind and, ultimately, influenced my decision to go to Javier and get a quarter pound of weed fronted. I figured I could sell weed from my window and use the money to take care of the things we needed, and then I'd get out of the dope game. Afterall, my old clientele still showed up looking for weed, so no harm no foul, right?

Ray had discovered the rifles on Eugene's trailer the morning of my arrest. I was cool with Jessie keeping a couple because he was like family, but Ray clearly didn't like me anymore and I wasn't happy about him having one if what I ignorantly thought of as my guns. So I confronted him about it. He denied having any of the guns, said he gave them all to Gene. I asked Joe and Eugene if they could be mistaken and they said they weren't, but I should just let it go. I tried to let it go, put it out of my mind.

On August 9, 1995 I was in my window when Ray and some of his coworkers pulled up to his trailer for their lunch break. On impulse I decided to jump out of the window and confront Ray again. I said, "Look Ray. I know you kept one of the guns. You can keep it, just give me \$30 for it. We're doing bad right now and I need all the money I can get."

Ray became hostile and red in the face. “I told your punk ass I ain’t got no goddamned guns! Now you get your sorry ass away from my trailer before I beat your goddamned ass, boy!”

“Fuck you bitch!” I screamed back at him. Who the hell was he to yell at me? My ego got the best of me. We shouted back and forth at each other for a minute before my mom came outside and demanded that I get inside. She told Ray to stop threatening me and to go on. Like a dumbass, I told Ray on the way inside my trailer, “I bet my dad and Steven don’t tell me get inside when they get home bitch!”

About an hour later I took a risk. I ran over to Eugene’s trailer and found him and Joe in Jessie’s bedroom. I told them everything that transpired. I can’t recall verbatim what all I said, but I was boiling hot and I didn’t want Ray to get away with stealing from me and threatening me. I was merely venting to them, not asking for their help to murder Ray, as Eugene later testified.

My brother arrived home from work after 5pm. I told him about Ray. Just after 6:30pm I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life and told my father all about Ray. We talked about it and my brother promised he would whoop Ray’s ass when he came home from work. In the places I grew up, a fist fight was a common way of handling problems.

It was Friday night and Ray liked to go to the bar on Sheldon after work, I later learned at trial, and get home by 10pm. By then my parents were asleep and Steven and I had discussed the situation. He said we should let it go. Ray was our neighbor and we had to live next to him. Besides, didn’t I want to stay out of trouble? Of course I did. I agreed with his logic and was content with forgetting all about it.

As I prepared to lay it down for the night I heard Ray pull up. A moment later I heard his front door slam and him yelling. I pulled the curtain back and saw Ray between our trailers, his arms flailing in the air and he was screaming something like, “Get your goddamned ass over here! I will beat your motherfucking ass!”

I learned through Jane’s testimony at trial that Ray’s dog had gotten loose. I mistakenly thought he was calling after me when I turned to my brother and told him Ray was outside talking shit. He told me to put my boots on and then he went to wake our father up.

I was the first to exit our trailer. As soon as I rounded the bend and Ray’s truck came into view I saw him leaning into the driver’s side door. Immediately I thought he was searching for the gun. At trial Jane said he kept an extra dog leash in the truck. I yanked him from his truck and smelled the alcohol on his breath as I drove my fist into his face. In seconds Steven was there, wrestling Ray to the ground. As they grappled I tried to help by kicking at Ray, but I hit Steven and backed up, letting them fight.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw my father running to the scene. Before he arrived Ray broke free of Steven and ran behind his trailer. My father and brother gave chase. I stayed where I stood as my friends from the trailer park gathered around, asking what was going on? I said, “Ray was talking shit and he’s getting the fuck beat out of him.”

Jessie walked towards the back of Ray's trailer, to see what was happening. There was a fence to the storage company back there and the woods so it was pitch black and we couldn't see anything five feet ahead from us. A moment later my father appeared, covered in blood, and Steven mumbled something about Ray pulling a knife and getting what he deserved. My father ordered me into our car, which we'd recently traded our truck for, then he and Steven went inside to get my mother.

We fled the scene in two cars, one belonged to Gary Wilborn. We rode to the Northside and dad dropped the car off at Bill Dee's, then we rode to Port Arthur, Texas and stayed with John at his condo.

All my father or brother mentioned about what went on behind the trailer was Dad stabbed Ray. I didn't think Ray needed to be stabbed; Steven was doing a good job fighting him.

We stayed at John's for about a week. I woke up one morning and started playing the guitar with John as Steven rolled joints. Dad came into the room and showed us a newspaper article. Ray was dead and he and Steven were wanted for murder and we couldn't simply move and it all goes away. My father was headed to prison, and possibly Steven.

John didn't want us staying at his place. He had a newborn kid and didn't need the heat there. We went to Cousin Carrol's in West Orange and she allowed us to stay there until dad could figure something out.

While we were there I met a girl named Christy that I fell in love with, probably the first girl that I actually loved in my life. I was on the front porch of Carrol's with her husband Mike, watching their kids play in their front yard. Christy lived in the apartment building next to their house and she came down the stairs in a tight pair of shorts as I sat there with Mike. She had curly dirty blonde hair and wore glasses. I turned to Mike, "Damn, that girl is fine! Look at that nice little ass!"

Christy lived in the upstairs apartment with her little brother and their guardian, an old friend of their mother's. After I made the comment about her butt, my little cousins ran to her and ratted me out. Christy told them to bring me over to her place. They yanked on my shirt. "Robert! We told Christy what you said about her butt and she wants to see you NOW!"

I met Christy and we joked about how embarrassingly honest kids can be. She was super cool, very easy to talk to, and all I did over the next 10 days or so was hang out with her. We got stoned and she told me about the roller coaster life she and her little brother had lived with their crackhead mother. They were living in a car and their mother would lock them in it in the middle of crack town while she sold herself to dealers for dope. The woman who took them in after their mother went to prison had grown up with their mother and seemed to have a heart of gold. She didn't mind at all that I stayed up half the night with Christy, discussing our futures and falling deeply in love.

It was in the wee hours of the morning of August 22, 1995 that I left Christy's apartment to crash out at Carrol's. My brother was in the kitchen cooking eggs and asked if I wanted some. We shot the bull for a bit until I heard Carrol's dog barking outside. I opened the front door and caught about 20 cops creeping up to the house. I slammed the door and yelled, "RAID!"

I'd mistakenly thought that it was a dope raid since Carrol sold weed for John. Like John, she'd been raided several times in the past.

I ran into the kids' room and pretended to be asleep in their closet. I heard the cops in the livingroom shouting orders. They found me and asked why I was in the closet? I said I slept in there. Before they could question why I slept on a pile of toys a cop in the livingroom said, "Here he is! Howard Pruett, it's tattooed on his arm. You are under arrest!"

"What's he under arrest for?" I heard my father ask.

"For murder! If you don't shut up you're going down, too." A cop said.

The orange police had their information confused. Since my father and brother share the same name they thought they were looking for one suspect. I was a juvenile and my name didn't show in the initial warrant. They cuffed my brother and took him outside, closing the front door behind them.

My father, mother and I were in Carrol's bedroom. Dad got dressed and I said, "They'll realize their error and be back soon. Let's jump out the window and run!"

"No, son." My dad looked tired. "I ain't running no more. They'll catch me sooner or later."

"Fuck that, dad! Let's go!"

I opened the window and motioned my father to follow me. I jumped outside and hopped a fence, ran through a back yard and into the woods. My father wasn't behind me. I kept running anyways. It took me about an hour to find civilization. I walked until I found a familiar road and followed it to a dope house that John controlled. I called John from there and he sent someone to pick me up. I was taken to Vinton, Louisiana to a trailer out in the sticks where John kept the majority of his dope. John said I'd be safe there.

A couple of days later I decided to turn myself in. Junior, who finally told me he was the one to call the police on my dad for the reward while he was on his deathbed in 2008, said the cops told him that they would seek the death penalty on my father if I didn't turn myself in. John advised me to stay put, but I thought that they only wanted me for questioning so I called my mom and told her I'd drop by Carrol's where she was at to see her before I turned myself in.

I met my mom at Christy's apartment around 11pm. I explained to Christy why I lied about not being able to begin school with her the following month, as she hoped I would. She seemed to understand. I was protecting my father and had told her I couldn't go to

school because I was on the run for violating my probation. I hugged my mom and assured her everything would be okay, that they'd let me and Steven go really soon. Afterall, we hadn't killed anyone.

Christy's front door exploded open and the police poured into the apartment with their guns drawn, demanding everyone get down with their hands on their heads. I was arrested and extradited later that night to the juvenile detention center in Houston.

Thrown Away

Juvenile Detention Center – Age of Reason

August 24 – October 31, 1995

The heavy, metal door clangs shut. I cringe as keys jangle and the dead bolt clicks into place, securing me in my ‘room’. They call it that to make it seem less appalling to juvenile prisoners, but it’s a cage in every sense of the word. There’s a stainless steel toilet/sink, a built-in light, concrete walls and floor and a metal bunk. I unroll my thin mattress. It’s been a painfully long day and I just want to sleep. I crawl under a grey blanket and close my eyes, yet my mind races and I replay the day’s events.

Once I made my decision to turn myself in, I dipped into John’s cocaine and weed. I figured if I was going to jail I might as well get high first. I was wired to the gills when the police busted into Christy’s apartment to arrest me. They took me to the Orange County Jail and handcuffed me to a table for about five hours until the extradition was cleared, then two detectives drove me to the Harris County Juvenile Detention Center. They were elusive and noncommittal when I asked what was happening. My lawyer would fill me in on everything, the bald detective said. I was confused. “But don’t y’all just want to question me?”

“Our job is to take you to JDC.” The dark-haired detective looked hard at me.

Sweat oozes from my pores as I lay on my bunk. I chide myself for dipping into the cocaine. I swore I’d leave drugs alone. Could that be why God is punishing me with jail? Because I got high? I won’t mess with drugs anymore. I’ve gotta be clean for my probation because they do random drug tests. I wonder how long I’ll be here? Why do I even need a lawyer? I didn’t kill anybody. I should’ve asked that detective. I’m sure they’ll question me tomorrow, perhaps in the presence of a lawyer, which explains why I even need a lawyer. So it’s all done legit. Then they’ll release me to my mom. What will mom, Steven and I do without my father? How will our lives change? He didn’t need to stab Ray. Why the hell does he always gotta stab people? He scares me when he gets angry, always has. What was I thinking, telling him about the confrontation with Ray? That’s just it; I wasn’t thinking. I imagine a life without my father....

Perhaps things won't be so bad.

A chief wakes me up for breakfast. The guards here are called chiefs, and the juvenile prisoners are residents. More euphemisms to ease the blow of prison. I eat my breakfast – boy was I ravished – and lie back down. Every so often a chief signs something on my door. I ask what it is? I'm on special observation for 72 hours; only the doctor can lift it. What?! 72 hours?! I tell the chief I'm only here for questioning! I want to see my lawyer! He says he'll let them know. I pace the floor all day, stare out through a glass window into the hallway with tile floors and other rooms. I ask every chief the same things, get the same replies. That night a supervisor chief talks to me for several hours as I cry and tell him how scared I am, how I want to go home. he tries to calm me, says he'll be sure that someone speaks to me the following morning.

The next day a short and old Hispanic doctor comes into my room and sits on my bunk with me. He says I'll be escorted to a 24 hour detention hearing, but I shouldn't get my hopes up because he's sure I'll remain in custody due to the seriousness of the crime. He tries to calm me when I say I didn't do anything and I'm only here for questioning, but nothing he says reaches me.

I am taken to the detention hearing before a female judge. She says I'm being charged with murder and denies my release. I can barely breathe or stop the tears as my lawyer says we are waiting on a court date. When I ask why I am being charged when I didn't kill Ray, she says she doesn't know all of the facts of the case yet but will come talk to me in a few weeks. She says, "All we can do is wait on a court date and see what the judge says."

Alone in my room again. This must be a horrible nightmare. Why won't I wake up?! Are they trying to scare me into snitching on my father? I should've told my lawyer and judge I never saw Ray get stabbed! I bang on the door and scream until a chief appears. Through a flood of tears I say I need to see my lawyer again. He says he'll let them know and orders me to stop banging on the door. I wonder who 'them' is? Hours pass and I begin to panic. I bang on the door again and a chief returns with the Hispanic doctor. The doctor is stern with me, orders me to stop banging and calm down or I'll remain on observation. I work myself into a frenzy and become hysterical. "Please! You don't understand! I'm not supposed to be here! They made a mistake! Please, just let me go home! I can't stand it in here anymore! I'm only 15! Please! Let me go!!"

Over the next few days I remain in my room on observation, screaming and sobbing all day, begging to be released, unable to fathom my situation. The doctor and chiefs say it's out of their hands, I'm to remain in custody until the courts say otherwise. They don't even know my court date; it'll be mailed to me. I feel so frightened, so sad, so alone. The walls feel like they are closing in on me, I wheeze until I start hyperventilating, unbothered by the snot and tears running down my face. I curl into the fetal position in the corner of my room and moan for hours and hours, beg God to have mercy on me and

let me out. I repeatedly tell Him how sorry I am for being such a bad kid. I think about how stupid I have been and punch myself in the head and face, then bang my head on the floor until a chief catches me. Soon my room is filled with chiefs and the doctor. I'm handcuffed to the bunk. Just as they begin to leave I ram my head into the bunk and they quickly restrain me until a football helmet is strapped to my head. The doctor promises I'll remain there until I calm down. I curse him and the chiefs and lose all control, scream and trash about violently until I feel the sting of a needle prick my backside.

Darkness overtakes me.

I awake in my bed with no restraints. A chief is stationed outside of my door. He sees I'm up and calls for the doctor. The doctor explains the situation again, says I must relax and stop fighting what I can't change. As he speaks a chaplain arrives, the same old guy with a white beard and wire-framed glasses from the last time I was at JDC. He listens to everything I say about being scared and alone and how I don't belong there. He tells me about the apostle Paul and early followers of Jesus being imprisoned and reads from the bible. He has a soft, comforting voice. I calm down and listen attentively. "Trust in Jesus," He says. "Give him all of your pain, your burden, and believe he died for you, Robert. Jesus is the only way."

I know I need help. I need saving. I'm a lost soul. I need someone to lean on. The way the chaplain talked, all of my problems were from not having Jesus in my life. If I learned to have faith in Jesus, He could make the prison walls around me collapse, so to speak. They allowed me to have a small bible, but no other property aside from boxers and state clothes, which were blue pants and a white t-shirt at JDC. I read my bible daily. The chaplain returned every day to pray with me. I felt a sense of peace and tranquility unlike anything I'd ever experienced. When I gave myself to Jesus and prayed with the chaplain, all of my sorrow and pain seemed to fade away. I trusted and believed that only God could save me.

About a week after I arrived at the JDC the doctor cleared me to recreate with others and participate in the programs of the institution. If they want their privileges, the residents at the JDC must adhere to a strict set of rules that include making your bed properly, keeping your room clean and orderly and following all orders by the chiefs. If you stay out of trouble you can go to the dayroom to watch TV and play table games, go to the gym and play basketball or volleyball, participate in school when the teacher arrived three days a week and make one five minute phone call per week. As long as your first disciplinary isn't too serious they only reprimand you, but each subsequent one usually results in being placed in your room for 'time-out'.

Incidentally, the same day my initial observation was lifted I got a visit! I hugged my mom and sister in a booth downstairs and they cried with me. Mom said they'd moved in with Dewey on the north side of Houston so they could visit me, my brother and father

regularly. She said they were in the Harris County jail. My mom was just as scared as I was. “I don’t know what to do, baby boy!”

I held her and my sister tightly. I told them about Jesus and asked them to pray with me, then assured them everything was in God’s hands and would be okay. We visited for 20 minutes before a chief told us time was up. After hugging and kissing them I said I’d be home soon, not to worry. My mother looked worn out and unsure of anything. All at once her family had been ripped away from her, her world turned upside down. Over the next 7 or 8 years she’d be forced to live with relatives who didn’t want her with them and end up in homeless shelters a couple of times. She said she was lost without her boys and husband.

A few weeks after my arrest a chief handed me an envelope with a strange name penned in pretty handwriting. Ki Halalio? Inside I discovered a picture. Ah, it was Ki (pronounced ‘Key’) from Channelview! She was almost 14 years old then. She used to be Rusty’s girlfriend when he and Eugene first moved to Channelview. Ki’s mom had taken us all to Galveston, Stewart Beach, when they first got together and I’d hung out with her many times over the years. It was through Ki that I first met Mandy Fulton, when Ki tried to hook us up, but that night Eugene, Rusty and I were caught sneaking into Eugene’s girlfriend’s house to meet the girls and his girlfriend’s grandfather fired a shotgun into the sky to scare us! At JDC, I got a long letter from Ki saying she’d heard I was there, knew about Ray’s death and wanted to write and support me in any way she could. She said she saw me walking down Market Street at 5:30am in July while in the car with her mother and I looked “rough as if I’d been out high all night, but sexy as hell!” She wanted to pick me up, give me money or take me somewhere to get a shower and eat, but her mom was afraid to stop. I don’t blame her. That was undoubtedly the night I crashed Baby G’s dad’s car into the ditch.

A few letters into our correspondence, Ki became my girlfriend. She confessed to having a crush on me since Galveston, but never acted on it because she was with Rusty. Over the next 10 months we grew incredibly close, writing each other daily and visiting several times a week – once I got to Harris County Jail. Her mom, Marilynn, brought her to see me since Ki was a juvenile, but she supported our relationship in every way. Marilynn even sent me money for commissary and paid our enormous phone bills from talking every day. Ki’s love and support helped me through some of the darkest times of my life.

Most of the juvenile prisoners living on the wing with me were repeat offenders and had been to TYC. We’d recreate, play cards and board games, go to school and the gym together. They were aggressive kids with chips on their shoulders; most had grown up in ghettos and barrios and were gang related. They liked to roughhouse and fight, but the chiefs kept a close eye on us. There were not many fights while I was there, but I got into one in the shower area, while the other kids watched out for us, and another in the

dayroom I was playing spades with this tall and lanky black kid and he got mad at me, stood up and slapped me. I jumped up and shoved him into the chair, took a swing at him, then the chief broke us up and sent us to our rooms for 24 hours.

There was a short and muscular Hispanic kid who helped pass out food trays and clean the hallways and dayrooms. I used to see him sweeping and mopping while I was locked in my room. Since I had a murder case I couldn't have a roommate and I got bored and lonely sometimes. I asked the kid how he got to work? He said the chiefs all knew and trusted him after being there for so long.

About a month after I arrived the Hispanic kid was shipped to TYC. I asked a chief if I could help pass out food trays? He was cool with it. Soon, I was pulled out to clean dayrooms, the gym, the hallways and even visitation. They let me help feed as well. I'd get an extra tray or two for helping, and, depending on the chief, I got to use the phone on Sundays for over an hour sometimes. Working kept my mind off of my situation and my stomach nice and full.

Reading also kept me preoccupied. I read my bible, sure, but it wasn't until I got to JDC that I read my first entire book. It was Four Past Midnight by Stephen King. The stories captivated me and awakened a love for reading that I did not realize I had. In school, I hated reading, ignorantly thinking it was something geeks and nerds did. But at the JDC I immersed myself in books and liked to talk about them to whoever would listen. A Southwest Cholo gang member named Edgar shared books with me and we'd get animated talking about what we'd read. He once said, "I didn't ever like to read before I came here. It was boring. I love to read now, esse!"

They had a cart filled with books by the chief's station up front. All of the books were either religious or about troubled and at-risk teens. I discovered S.E. Hinton then, when I read her book That Was Then, This Is Now. I related to the kids in the books, particularly the alcoholic, except that I was addicted to coke instead. I read books about kids who'd grown up in bad neighborhoods and followed a similar path that I had, about their struggles at school with peer pressure and their abusive parents, how they overcame these obstacles and made it in life. These books were written to make us stop and think about the lives we'd lived and help us change our attitudes and overall outlook on life. Alone in my room, facing charges of murder and the fear of an unknown future, I reflected on my past. I thought about all the people I had hurt in my life. How did a homeowner feel when he returned home to find his place violated and his possessions stolen by me and my friends? I had no right to take from people who had worked hard for what they had. I had no right to take from anyone. I realized that the drugs and my addiction to the fast life clouded my judgment, rendered me extremely selfish and didn't allow me to empathize with the people I had robbed or hurt with my behavior. I was ashamed of myself, the person I'd been, and I desperately wanted to change. I didn't want to hurt or steal from people anymore. I was beginning to understand that stealing and robbing

wasn't just wrong because you'd go to jail, but more importantly, it was wrong because it hurt innocent people.

Away from all the negative influences and off of drugs for the first time in years, my conscience was awakening.

Reading about the destructive paths of other teens and the lives they had damaged, including their own, made me think about Ray again. His death had been on my mind since I read the article at John's, but it didn't really sink in until I was at the JDC. During that first week, while I was freaking out, I thought of my father killing Ray and mumbled incoherent prayers for Ray and his family. I begged Jesus to forgive me for being the catalyst that brought it all about. After reading a book on taking responsibility for our actions, I truly understood that it was my fault that Ray was dead. Had I not been out breaking into people's houses there would be no guns for Ray to take. I felt stupid for telling my father about the threats, for thinking those guns belonged to me! Didn't I know my father would react violently? Yes, I must've known, but I really had no idea he'd kill Ray.

The weight of Ray's death was on my shoulders. I prayed again for forgiveness.

While I knew I was morally culpable of Ray's murder, I had no idea I was legally responsible. I mean, I didn't murder him, my father did. Thus, when I was handed papers saying I would go before a judge who'd determine whether or not I'd be certified as an adult I was shocked and freaked out again. In my room I cried myself into another hysterical episode and even blamed God. Couldn't He see I was trying to change? Didn't He believe me? Where was my mercy? I ripped my bible to shreds and cursed the chiefs; they placed me back on observation.

The chaplain came by later and, after speaking with him, I felt guilty for blaming God. He said something about God allowing for trials in our lives to help us grow, and I shouldn't lose my faith so easily. We prayed together and I confessed my sins, placing everything in Jesus' hands again.

On October 31, 1995 I went to court with three other 16 year olds, all of us with murder charges and facing adult certification. We were all certified as adults by judge Pat Shelton. My mom and Ki stood behind me in support as the judge reviewed the psychologist's report. The psychologist had evaluated me earlier that month and said I was competent, which was all the judge was really looking at. My lawyer said I'd be better off in an adult court where the burden of proof is much greater. I wasn't so sure, but I put my faith in Jesus and prayed.

The following morning a white van took all of us to the Harris County Jail. On the ride there Michael Jackson's "You Are Not Alone" came on the radio. I was scared of going to the county jail, where all the chiefs said a young, skinny white boy like me would likely be raped and beaten daily, but the song comforted me and made me think of Jesus walking with me.

Harris County Jail – A Lion’s Den

November 1, 1995 – July 23, 1996

There was one Hispanic and two black kids certified as adults with me. We were taken to the 1302 Franklin jail and placed in a holdover cell together. The bars and wire mesh cages, along with the angry and aggressive jailers, casted an immediate oppressive and dismal ambience. A tall and muscle bound black jailer set the tone for us. “You boys are not in daycare anymore. You will follow orders here and conduct yourselves like men, ‘cause that’s what the courts say you is, and if you give me or any of my deputies problems we will not hesitate to beat your ass and make your life miserable.”

If that drill instructor-esque speech didn’t convince us, the bloody beat down that another deputy unleashed on a mouthy trustee a few hours later certainly did. We talked amongst ourselves in the first holdover and tried to exude courage and confidence, but inside we were all trembling. I wasn’t prepared for the extremely long intake process. We waited for over five hours in that first holdover before being herded into another holdover with pay phones. We were alone in the first holdover, but in the second one there were about 50 grown men, and many were arguing over the phones. Several times fights broke out and the deputies ran in there busting heads. My certified friends and I decided it was best to just wait until we got to our tanks to make our calls. It took about three days to get up to a tank. They just kept moving us from one holdover to the next. They showered us that first day and fed us peanut butter sandwiches every day. Every holdover was a concrete enclosure with slabs of brick to sit and lay down on. Dudes were strewn out all over the place, using rolls of toilet paper as pillows. I might’ve gotten four hours of sleep the whole time. It was miserable.

Some of the grown men with us were amazed by our ages, the fact that we were certified as adults. One loud mouth young black dude told us war stories about what to expect up on the youngster tanks. He said something like, “You niggas gone be alright. Specially da big ass nigga dat don’t talk much. Meskin, you gang related? You might be aight if you got some homies up there. White boy, yo ass in trouble. White boys have it hard in jail and da penitentiary. Unless you ass funny and tell lots a jokes to make da niggas laugh. I knowed a white boy once, funny ass cracka mothafucka, didn’t nobody fuck wit da fool ‘cause he was funny. You funny, white boy? Better be....”

We all landed in 7-C-2. All of C-side on the 7th floor housed certified adults. In 1995 Harris County certified 150 juveniles. It was by far the most any county in the nation had ever certified in one year, and Harris County had broken its own record of about 110 the year before. I heard it dropped back under 100 in 1996 and hasn’t ever gone over 100 since. 1995 was the year the politicians were being tough on juvenile crime. Most of the

juveniles in Harris County had aggravated cases, but some were there for being repeat offenders and dope cases.

7-C-2 was a corner tank, a dormitory with metal bunk beds that housed about 50 juveniles when I showed up. I held my mattress and necessities – a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant and bible with my addresses written inside – as we stepped into the sally port to wait for a deputy to let us into the tank. Iron bars separated us from a dayroom with stainless steel tables, a TV mounted on the wall, four pay phones and the most aggressive group of teenagers I'd ever saw in one place. A lot of them looked twice my size. Several hugged the bars and looked at us "newhouses" with menace. They asked a thousand questions. "Where you from? You bangin'? (meaning gang banging) What you representin'? You gone stay down for them shoes, white boy? How bout you, Meskin? Oh, don't think I don't see those sweet ass Nike's pretty ass nigga wit da gold in yo mouth! Betta hope you fight hard nigga..."

I'd never been more nervous and scared in my life as the iron-barred door opened and we stepped into the fire. The deputy shut the outer door and we were alone to fend for ourselves, unlike JDC. The tank was deafening as youngsters slammed dominos, beat on tables and rapped, loud talked each other and argued over who had dibs on what newhouse. I found an unoccupied top bunk and put my stuff up there, crawled up and laid down. The long intake process wore me out, but I knew I wouldn't be getting any sleep for a long time. The four of us had known we'd be checked once we entered a tank, and that meant fighting to prove ourselves. I was tense and tried to slow down my heartbeat, get rid of the butterflies in my stomach.

A fat white kid named Big Mike approached me first. "You gonna stay down, Wood?"

"You damn right I am." To stay down means to fight.

"Ok, just seeing where your heart's at." He left my bunk area.

A few moments later a light-skinned black dude named 3rd Ward hit me up. "Say, da white boy wanna check yo boxin game."

He pointed at Big Mike standing in the corner. I jumped off my bunk and closed the distance between us in determined strides. Big Mike threw his hands up and the fight was on. He swung at me and hit me in the chest, but I busted him in the mouth and drove him against the wall... Suddenly, fists connected to the back of my head and back. About 15 youngsters jumped on me and beat me black and blue. Big Mike was a decoy for the tank initiation, which apparently was being clicked on. The Mexican newhouse that came in with me got the same treatment because he was not gang related, but the black kids never went through it. I met a couple of stand-up white dudes in that tank called Duke and Big Bird and they said that's how it goes in jail. The white dudes catch the most heat, have to fight the most, while the blacks and most Hispanics get a free pass just because of their race. Most of them still end up fighting, but they don't go through nearly the amount of shit that a white dude goes.

Several dudes congratulated me for fighting and told me to go o the shower and clean up. I thought the fight was over, but that night I had a one-on-one fight, and over the next couple of weeks I fought daily, sometimes multiple times a day. I fought over my shoes, the phone, the food trays that the deputies just leave on the table and let us battle over, my bunk and even my toothpaste. I made commissary, thanks to Marilynn, and most of it was stolen; I fought over that, although I never knew who actually stole my stuff. I never got it back either.

Big Mike was my best chance of winning a fight the first few months I was in Harris County Jail. After that, I lost every single fight I was in until early 1996. I had speed, heart and tenacity, but those youngsters had size, strength, speed and lots of experience. Many of them had grown up on the streets and in TYC fighting and they wore me out. The first time I went to visitation I had black eyes, swollen lips and knots all over my head. When Ki saw me she cringed and looked frightened. “Ohmigod, Robert! You look like the Elephant Man! Are you okay, baby?!”

I tried to play it off and act tough, but more than my pride was bruised. It was hard to sleep at night for all of the pain and fear.

After a couple weeks of life in 7-C-2 I'd become weary and enervated. I watched the Hispanic kid I was certified with get his head kicked back and forth like a pinball between the concrete floor and iron bar to a table. They had to cart him off the tank to medical. That same day I got beat up by the shower over a roll of toilet paper.

We went up to the 13th floor to recreate. There's a weight section up there with free weights, two basketball courts, a handball court and an outside area where the roof is open to the sky except for the bars and chain linked fence. I told the rec deputy that I was scared, depressed and had thoughts of killing myself. The only reason I said anything to him was because he was being cool to me, talking to me about my case and the bible. He picked up the phone and called someone. Five minutes later I was taken down to the 3rd floor and placed in a rubber room on suicide watch for 24 hours!

Naked inside the rubber room, I felt sorry for myself. They keep it cold in there to calm the psych patients down, so I crawled into a corner as far away from the nasty piss and shit hole in the floor as possible and cried as I talked to myself and God. A lot of it was incoherent gibberish, me repeatedly cursing myself for being a bad enough kid to get myself in such an agonizing situation. Then I pleaded with God to have mercy on my soul. At some point a chaplain opened the door and conversed with me. He said he ministered to some of the juveniles upstairs and knew life up there was hard. He prayed with me and, after I calmed down, promised to have a word with the doctor about releasing me from the rubber room.

An older white lady was the psychiatrist assigned to me. She seemed nice and sympathetic as I told her about myself and expressed my fears of living on the 7th floor.

She assigned me to a psych tank on the 3rd floor for about 3 weeks so I could pull myself together, but she warned me I would soon have to move back up to the juvenile tanks.

The psych tank I was in held about 15 inmates, all in their 30's or above. We didn't have a TV or hot pot for coffee or soups, and we had to pull our mattresses out into the dayroom during daylight hours so the deputies could watch us better. There were a couple of real Looney-Tunes in the tank. One black guy barked like a dog, another black guy thought he was Jesus and a white dude mouthed silently to invisible creatures. Almost everyone else seemed sane enough and were laid back. An older black dude and a Russian became my friends. The black dude thought everything was funny and had an infectious laugh. We listened to the Russian tell elaborate stories of misadventures on the streets, smoking crack with prostitutes and sleeping under bridges. We came up with a game 'name that old sit-com,' in which we whistled the tune and the others had to guess it. It was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

If I had it my way I would've stayed in the psych tank. I got to use the phone as much as I wanted, no one ever tried to hog me for my food and the deputies would sometimes allow me to visit Ki or my mom for over 2 hours at a time. The normal visiting time was 20 minutes.

But I had to go back upstairs and be a man.

Back on the 7th floor I had to field questions about 'catching out'. To catch out is to tell the police you can't make it on a general population wing and ask for protection. Technically, I didn't catch out, but those juveniles looked at me as if I were weak-minded for going to a psych tank, as if I couldn't handle the pressure of a regular tank. It wasn't so much that I couldn't handle it as I didn't want to deal with it, at first. I had so much on my mind with my case, with Dewey kicking my mother out and forcing her into the George Foreman homeless shelter, and it wasn't easy dealing with all of that on top of the madness of the juvenile tanks. But I knew I had to and I sucked it up. It took a few weeks and quite a few vicious brawls, but I gained some respect in the juvenile tanks eventually.

I didn't realize it then, but I was gaining valuable experience that would help me once I hit the penitentiary. I learned how to fight in the juvenile tanks. In the free world I'd been in a few fights, but I had no real skills and zero technique. I used to just put my head down and swing wildly or try to wrestle. Those tactics didn't work in Harris County or the penitentiary. An experienced fighter will sidestep you and hit you with an uppercut and box your ears off. I learned how to bob and weave, fake with a left or right jab and then hammer you with the opposite hand. I learned all the fancy footwork and combinations that everyone loves to see in a fight. I found out the hard way that some of that 'pretty boxing' will get you hurt with an experienced prison fighter, but in the county it worked and I began to notch victories and gain confidence in the early part of 1996.

I'll never forget my first victory in the county jail. When they roll the doors for breakfast we had to call 'shotgun' on our phone time. In fact, we had to call shotgun on

everything there: toilet paper, food trays, trash bags for washing clothes and even state soap. Unless you were the tank boss or his homeboys. The biggest and baddest dude become tank boss. He and his homeboys share a phone, they get first dibs on laundry, food trays and watch whatever they want on TV. The rest of us fight over whatever is left over. Anyhow, when the doors roll in the morning for breakfast you hear dudes yelling out, “Shotgun on the phone from 1-2pm....” “Shotgun from 8-9pm..., etc....”

One morning I called out shotgun from 4-5pm on the phone. Everyone knew that was my time. I needed to talk to Ki after school let out. That day a newhouse, a lanky black kid from the south side, showed up to our tank. The tank boss was 5th Ward and he asked me to let “the brotha” get the first 15 minutes of my time and Ug-Mo (short for ugly motherfucker) would give him the last 15 minutes of his time. This way the dude would get to call his people. I wasn’t a greedy dude so I agreed, although I wondered why 5th Ward didn’t let the dude use some of his 16 hours of phone time!

I let South Side know when he had five minutes left. He didn’t even acknowledge me. When his fifteen minutes were up I told him it was time and he asked for a few more minutes. I said okay and turned to walk away, but I overheard him laugh and tell his people something about a ‘punk ass white boy’ so I spun back around. I hung the phone up and said, “Catch a cell and I’ll show you who’s a punk, bitch!” We were in 7-C-5, a tank with cells, and we tried to take fights to the cells so the deputies wouldn’t catch us and take our TV or beat us up. South Side followed me into the cell and I caught him above his eye, closing it shut, then he charged me. I side-stepped him and hit him with upper cuts and a knee to the face and he fell onto the bunk, giving me the positioning I needed to beat the shit out of him.

Unfortunately, a deputy just so happened to be walking by as we fought and he called back up. They pulled us into the multipurpose room down the hall from the tank and whooped both our asses. The deputies liked to call us ‘gangsters without our guns’ in the juvenile tanks, and they found reasons to put their hands on us. Many times, after fights or horse playing or even being too loud, the deputies would force us all to sit at the tables with our foreheads on them and our hands behind our backs. Anyone who moved or spoke got themselves slapped, punched, kicked or worse. You better not try to fight back either. One kid from Trinity Gardens took a swing at a deputy once and they beat him so bad he had to go to the emergency room.

I never saw that kid again.

The fighting isn’t the only thing that made the juvenile tanks rough. The kids games they liked to play broke many dudes. You’re walking out of your cell, minding your own business, when suddenly a roll of toilet paper slams into your face! Everyone thinks that’s the funniest shit ever. In the shower someone rips the plastic trash bag we used for privacy down, exposing you to the whole tank, and you then discover your clothes are gone. As you search the tank, naked, they all laugh hysterically. It’s a real knee slapper when

someone steals some of your commissary and makes it look like someone who had nothing to do with the theft is the culprit. You've never saw a more amused bunch the day that R-Lok woke up and ran his fingers through his hair. He felt the wetness up there and looked at his hand to find it covered in magic shave and hair. He jumped up and looked in the mirror. Dudes had drew designs and put initials and gang signs on his head!

They roll the doors at 7am for dayroom time and they stay open until 'rack time' at 10:30pm, unless it's Friday or Saturday: the weekends are 'late rack' and the doors stayed open until 1am. In the juvenile tanks, if you decide to sleep in, you're subject to a variety of rude awakenings, such as the magic shave incident. I've seen dudes get slapped hard right in the face and curse the entire tank out in an attempt to get the person who did it to admit it. That usually leads to multiple fights for the dude. I've seen dudes get toilet paper around their toes and lit on fire and they woke up screaming.

Once, after my cellie and I had stayed up late the night before swapping stories, I slept in. My cellie slept on the bunk and I slept under it with a blanket drooped down to block the light. I had both of our bags of commissary under the bunk with me, all the way against both walls, right by my head. My cellie woke me up in a panic and told me to check and see if the commissary was still there. I looked up and noticed that half of my mattress and body was under the bunk while the other half was out in the middle of the cell. Someone had carefully slid me and my mattress out from under the bunk while I slept, oblivious! The commissary was gone! I was so pissed off that I put my shoes on and went into the dayroom and said, "Which-ever ho-ass bitch stole my shit better step up or I'm gonna tear this whole motherucker up!"

The entire tank seemed to stand up and they clicked on me. Afterwards, 5th Ward made Ug-Mo, the one who stole my shit, fight me head up. I'd already beaten his ass once and didn't have much of a problem with him then. I got mine and my cellie's stuff back, but because he didn't help me fight for it I kept his and kicked him out of the cell. I couldn't live with someone I couldn't trust.

Life was wild and crazy in the juvenile tanks and you had to have heart to make it in there.

After accumulating a disciplinary record I was placed in 7-C-4, an interior lockdown tank. There were eight cells, one inmate to a cell, and we got 1 hour of rec per day to shower, use the phone and watch TV. We also got to go to the 13th floor to rec 3 days per week together, plus they opened the doors for school, commissary and count. School was Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9am – 1pm. Usually, the teacher wouldn't show up for well over an hour and we'd use that time to roughhouse and be the little hellions we were. Unless it was our rec time, we didn't dare use the phone or try showering because the deputies would beat us up.

I was in that tank for a couple months before I left the Harris County jail. About once a week we'd flood our cells and tell the nightshift deputies our toilets were backing up so they'd roll our doors and let us clean it up. We used that time to screw around.

One night, after we flooded, the deputies must've caught on to our little game. They lined us up on our knees against the wall and told us to put our hands behind our backs. They then went and tore our cells up, throwing personal property like pictures, letters and books into the water. Next they beat on us, one-by-one. One kid got punched, the next got kicked, the one beside me got slapped, then it was my turn. The deputy grabbed a handful of my hair and asked me my name. "Pruett, Sir." "Pruett? Ain't you the one gotta daddy on the 5th floor?"

"Yes, Sir."

He slammed me on my head and busted it open, then kicked me in the ribs and pointed down at me. "Tell your piece of shit daddy Deputy Rollins says hello."

One good thing about 7-C-4 is it gave me time to read and ruminate on the bible, among other Christian literature. I read the heart-wrenching tale "Outcry in the Barrio" by a Mexican dude from San Antonio who was a heroin addict and had a horrible life until he was transformed by Jesus. I read the entire New Testament over and over again, meditated on the scriptures and tried hard to understand and grow in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote about being renewed in Christ, putting the old self away and living without sin. Again, I reflected on my life and all of the pain I caused so many people. I contributed to their addictions selling them drugs, even introduced drugs to many kids, stole from people who loved me, stole from people who didn't know me, and I recklessly put myself above everyone else. I was repulsed and absolutely hated the person I had been. I prayed daily and studied the bible diligently in hopes of becoming a renewed person in Christ. I didn't want to cause anyone pain ever again.

I also prayed for strength. I'd been indicted on murder charges in early 1996, but I had no idea what would happen next. I saw my lawyer, Kurt Wentz, only once and all he said is that the state had witnesses and that my brother and I were being charged under the 'law of parties' statute. All of the other juveniles were signing for time, making plea deals that their lawyers had worked for them. The Hispanic kid I was certified with got 20 years for his murder charge, the bright-skinned black dude who came in with us got 40 years for blowing two rival gang members' faces off with a 12 gauge shotgun, and the other black dude certified with us got 10 years. My father was offered 50 years and Steven was offered 25, but neither of them accepted those plea deals. Not that I would've accepted one, but I was never even offered a plea deal. I wrote my lawyer about once a week and he never even replied to me. I didn't have a clue what was going on. All I could do was wait patiently.

Trial of my Life

In early May of 1996 my lawyer called me out for a legal visit. “Are you ready to go to trial? We begin jury selection in the morning.”

“Huh?” I was completely taken aback. “I don’t understand why they want to try me when I didn’t kill Ray?”

“They are going to try you, your father and brother together. A joint trial. I will file a motion for severance, but the judge implied he’d deny it. They want to save money, it seems. You and your brother will be tried under the ‘law of parties’. I think there’s a good chance you will be acquitted. You were 15 and, as you said, your dad killed him.”

The “Law of Parties” is basically an accessory clause in the Texas penal code.

The law that I was tried under states that the state must prove that I “Intentionally and knowingly aided, assisted, conspired or encouraged in the commission of the crime.” If the jury found this to be true then I would be held criminally responsible for the actions of my father. I would be eligible for the same sentence he got. The only difference was my brother and I, being first time offenders in the adult system, were eligible for probation if the jury so decided.

Sally Ring was the assistant district attorney, Temple Driver the visiting judge, and they seemed to have a rapport that made judge Driver allow DA Ring to do whatever she wanted. A jury was assembled in a day, and my father, brother and I sat in the center of the room around a large table with our counsel and DA Ring. The case against us consisted of several witnesses, my father’s blood in Gary Wilborn’s car, and both of my father and brother’s hats that were found in front of Ray’s trailer. I have no idea how the hats got there because they certainly didn’t put their hats on before going outside to fight.

Jane testified about Ray coming home from the bar, the dog running outside and Ray chasing it. Jane and a mentally impaired woman from the trailer park both testified that they saw the three of us “jumpin on Ray,” but no one saw any stabbing. They certainly never saw me stab Ray. Abraham Soto testified that the three of us were crowded around Ray, beating on him. Jessie Young testified that he hopped to the scene and saw my father and brother emerge from behind Ray’s trailer with blood all over them and Steven saying something to the effect, “He pulled a weapon and got what he had coming.” Eugene and Jessie testified that I asked them early on the day of August 9th 1995 to “help me kill Ray.”

I cannot recall, verbatim, what I said in their bedroom after that afternoon, but I am sure I didn’t say it the way Eugene and Jessie testified. I remember being angry, steaming over Ray threatening me and keeping a gun I ignorantly thought belonged to me. I’m sure I cursed and said something about making him pay, but I absolutely did not ask Eugene, Jessie or anyone to help me kill Ray. That testimony is what enabled the jury to

convict me under the ‘law of parties.’” Without that testimony there’s nothing to prove any intent on my part.

My brother was the only one of us to testify during the guilt/innocence phase of the trial. He didn’t testify according to my recollection of how things transpired. He was repeatedly caught lying by DA Ring. He could state something and she’d say, “Are you sure that’s how it happened?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” My brother has a deep country accent; reminds me of Forrest Gump.

“I want you to take a look at and read this letter you wrote your father a couple months ago. Read the highlighted part aloud for the jury.”

He read it.

“Sounds to me,” Ms Ring begun triumphantly. “Like you were trying to get your stories straight, your testimony today doesn’t match the letter. Which version is the truth?”

“What I said today, Ma’am.”

This scenario played out similarly several times in which my brother was caught lying trying to minimize his role. At one point I put my face in my hands and smirked, thinking he’d better off just shutting up. At that exact instant I felt someone’s eyes on me and I looked up and caught the foreman of the jury staring at me. He quickly looked away. I knew right then that I was in deep shit. I was sure he thought I was smiling because I thought everything was a joke.

I absolutely did not.

I never testified during the guilt/innocence phase because my lawyer aid the DA had a letter that I wrote to my cousin Mike on the Cofield unit while I was in the JDC. In that letter I made a very insensitive comment about Ray’s death, bragging about being locked up for murder. My lawyer said they’d use it against me if I testified and he warned me not to.

Yes, I did write that letter. My only defense is I was young and ignorant when I wrote it. It was written within the first month of my incarceration. I thought it would impress Mike. Being a “killa” and having a murder case was sensationalized by the juveniles around me. They boasted of drive-by shootings, killing people and many other things, usually embellishing their roles to make themselves seem “hardcore” or “gansta”. The things I wrote in that letter were an insensitive and ignorant embellishment. My words clearly exhibited that I had a lot of growing up to do.

My father never testified. He worried that they’ bring up his extensive criminal past. He claimed to his lawyer that he stabbed Ray in self defense. He says he came outside and found Ray punching on me and he reacted. He sat through the entire trial looking down at the table, taking notes and never said a word. It’s hard to believe someone acted in self defense if they aren’t willing to testify on their own behalf and tell you what happened.

For years I was bitter and angry at my father. How could he just sit there and allow his sons to take the fall with him? He said the DA would not work with him on the plea deal; he tried to get her to release us and he'd take the 50 years. She wasn't trying to hear it. Perhaps that's why I wasn't ever given a plea deal option? I'm not sure. What I do know is my father should've taken the stand and told the jury what happened. Period. He should've taken responsibility for what he did.

It wasn't until my capital murder trial in 2002 that my father finally admitted, on the record, to killing Ray. He said his sons didn't have anything to do with it other than it all being behind Ray attacking me. I'm not sure if it would've changed the course of history had he admitted as much in our trial back in 1996, had he defended his sons' innocence, but the fact that he remained silent made me resent him for a long time.

None of us can know what it's like to walk in another person's shoes. I have analyzed my father's life over and over again, applying various models of psychology in an attempt to understand him and his behavior. He grew up without feeling much love, turned into a criminal early on and ended up spending the vast majority of his life behind bars. He was conditioned to violence from years of confinement and wasn't strong enough to break out of it. He acted selfishly and irresponsibly most of his life, leaving my mother alone to raise their kids while he went to prison, and even though I believe he sincerely tried to do the right thing and work for living from 1986 – 1995, he still had many unresolved issues and flaws that impelled him to violence. In a moment of weakness and fear of being thrown in to prison for the rest of his life, he selfishly tried to fight his own fate and ended up costing all of us our lives.

It took years, but I have completely forgiven my father. I'm able to forgive him because I have a better understanding of humans, our weaknesses and selfishness, than ever before. I'm able to forgive him because I know he loves me, my brother and mother and he regrets not doing the right thing back in 1995 and 1996. I am able to forgive him because of the lessons I learned from Christianity. How can I expect anyone to forgive me for all of the wrongs I have committed against them if I can't forgive the people who have wronged me? I have hurt and violated many people's rights of freedom and I am ashamed of my past actions; I can forgive my father because I know we all make mistakes and no single action defines who we are and our potential of being. It's not the errors we make in life that defines us, rather it's whether or not we learn from them, grow from them and become better people because of them. I believe people deserve chances to grow; every one of us has the potential to change and become better people. I'm able to forgive my father because I believe in his potential.

We were all three convicted of murder on May 8, 1996. With his history in mind, my father opted for a PSI (Pre-Sentencing Investigation) and for the judge to sentence him. In August of 1996 the judge gave him a life sentence.

My brother and I allowed the jury to sentence us. I testified during the punishment phase, over my lawyer's objection. I poured my heart out to the jury and likely sealed my fate in the process. I told them things I didn't have to tell them. My reasoning was that I wanted to be completely open and tell the whole truth. I told them what I remembered of the night Ray was killed. I cried as I recounted my criminal past: stealing and robbing and ruining my life with drugs and the fast life. I explained how I had found Jesus and how ashamed I was of the person I had been. I told them I wanted desperately to change and grow into a better person. I begged them to have mercy on me.

My brother and I sat in a holdover discussing the possibilities as the jury deliberated over our fates. Since he was older, Steven reasoned, they would give m half of whatever they gave him. He thought we both could get probation, but it was more likely that he'd get 20 years and me 10. Ten years sounded so long to my 16 year old ears!

Back in the court room we all stood as the clerk read our sentences. She read my brother's first and I began to panic when she said he was given 40 years in the TDCJ. How could I possibly do 20 years?! She then read my verdict: "Robert Lynn Pruett, a jury of your peers sentences you to 99 years in the TDCJ..."

I asked my lawyer if she said nine years? He said, "No, she said 99 ...Shhh. Let her finish."

The shock and absurdity of a 99 year sentence hit me like a ton of bricks. I fell back onto my chair and started hyperventilating, unable to catch my breath. A flood of tears streamed down my face. My shock turned to anger when I saw the jury being escorted out of the court room. How could they give me 99 years? They cut cold stares at me as they passed, inciting my anger and raw emotions further. I exploded on them. "You stupid motherfuckers! How could you give me 99 years?! I'll kill all of you sonofabitches!!"

I ripped the pink shirt I had on off, but remained seated. My lawyer had let me use the shirt for trial since I didn't have any clothes of my own. The deputies gave it to me in the holdover before court the first day and I got beat up by a grown ass man over it. He was a loud mouth black dude from Northshore. He asked me where I was from. When I told him Cloverleaf and Channelview he said, "Aw hell naw! Ain't no east side ass nigga gone be wearin no pink ass shirt." He then kicked my ass pretty badly. So I was already upset with having to wear the pink shirt, on top of the fact that my lawyer hadn't helped me much at all through the trial.

A jury isn't required to explain their vote. Apparently, they thought I was beyond rehabilitation, that the only solution was to throw me away.

Think about it for a second. Society places many restrictions on minors because they aren't mature enough to make responsible decisions. Studies have shown that parts of the brain related to reasoning don't fully develop until the mid-20's. At 15 I wasn't old enough to be outside after the 11pm curfew, I couldn't watch R-rated movies without adult supervision, I couldn't smoke, drink, get a tattoo, own a gun or even drive a car. Yet

I was mature and reasonable enough to make decisions that would impact the rest of my life? Old enough to spend the rest of my life in prison? It is still unfathomable to me.

Garza West Unit – South Texas Heat

July of 1996

My brother and I ‘caught chain,’ or rode the Blue Bird chain bus, which is ironically a white bus, together to the penitentiary on July 23, 1996. It was the first time I’d seen him since the trial and the first real quality time we got to spend together since before Ray’s death. We spent the night in a holdover downstairs in the Harris County Jail with about 50 other inmates. We talked about our case, our family, our hopes and the bible. We had hoped that the appeals courts would reverse the trial court’s decision and, at the very least, get our sentences reduced.

Around 5am we were all loaded onto the bus, handcuffed in pairs, and taken to the Garza West Unit in Beeville, Texas. I was placed in line right next to Steven and we were handcuffed and seated together. In fact, we were placed together in every line throughout the entire intake process on Garza West, thus, his number is 754889 and mine was 754890. Even though I was afraid and worried about what would happen to me in prison, my brother’s presence comforted me and gave me strength that first day.

The bright South Texas sun illuminated the razor-wired fences and made them sparkle as we pulled into the Garza West compound. The Garza West and East Units are built on the old Chase field Air Force base. Like all TDCJ units, guard towers surrounded the double fences. The inmates all wore white; the guards wear grey. On Garza, all the buildings were sheet metal and the inmates lived in dormitories. Each dorm had two large fans on either side of it, but they only circulate the extreme heat and humidity, making it feel like an oven inside.

As soon as I stepped through the door I felt all eyes on me, checking out the ‘new boots.’ Grown men of every race, but mostly black and Hispanic, were playing dominos and chess, watching TV and exercising. The cavernous architecture amplified all of the noise. My heart raced and sweat poured from every pore as I carried my mattress and property to my bunk. My brother was assigned to a different dorm, but I already knew I wouldn’t have him around to help me when it came time to show them was I was made of.

Regardless of what you have ever heard, read about or seen on TV, nothing can prepare you for what it’s really like inside prison. All of my father’s war stories, as well as everything the deputies and older inmates from the county jail had said, had me on edge and mentally prepared to fight. I knew it was coming, just didn’t know when, where and who. I promised myself I would stand tall and not back down from anyone.

Once the guard did a channel check on the TV and left the dorm, a young black dude who'd watched every move I made since I entered the building welcomed me to prison with an ultimatum: "Say, White boy. Watcha gone do? Fight, fuck or bust a \$60?"

Translation: I had the choice to fight him, let him have sex with me or pay him commissary for protection. His gold tooth sparkled when he smiled. Clearly, he thought he had easy prey. He was surprised when my first connected to his face, but he quickly recovered and dodged my next swing before teaching me a lesson in the art of prison fighting. He schooled me with combinations and overhands, knocking me down several times, but I got up every time I hit the floor and kept fighting. That was the key. Do not ever stay down. Fight until you can't lift your arms, otherwise the predator will own you. I gained some respect that first day, but I had much more to learn.

I went before UCC (Unit Classification Committee) earlier that day to determine my custody status, housing and job assignments. I was skinny and didn't have money for the commissary, so I was hoping for a job in the kitchen. In the TDCJ the inmates basically run the units, working in virtually every department from food service, laundry, maintenance, clean-up crews, field squads and even as clerks doing all the filing and paperwork. So I figured an easy job like the kitchen would be one I could handle. When I asked the warden about it he bared his tobacco stained teeth, and in the most exaggerated redneck voice said, "Boy, we gone start a young-un like you in da fields. Holla at me when ya grow some whiskers, then we'll see bout that food serive job."

The TDCJ doesn't pay its inmates to work, and working in the fields is pure slave labor. Everyone has an aggie, or hoe, that they beat on dirt with in time with the lead's row's, or inmate at the front of the line running the squad, count. Sometimes he'll sing in time with the aggies hitting the dirt to entertain the squad, and we often join in with him. Some of those songs were pretty funny. "One, two, three, now you four step... I robbed a bank, with ol hank, sleep in the tank and now I do the four step."

It's not as prevalent as it once was, but sometimes the field bosses, who ride horses and carry guns and wear cowboy hats, incite fights and wager with the other field bosses on the winner. I never saw it on Garza West, probably because it's a transfer/intake facility and I wasn't there very long, but on McConnell and Connally if you had a problem with another inmate in the line just step out the line and say, "I got me one, boss!" The field bosses want to see a boxing match; no wrestling allowed. It's from this tradition that inmates all over the system holler "Don't wrestle! Stand up and box!" if a fight turns into a wrestling match.

I couldn't stand the debilitating heat or the monotonous field work on Garza West unit. My brother and I caught chain with a white dude named Scratch who was tattooed from the head to toe and his ink looked scratched on. He'd been inside before so he tried to lace us up on how everything works, what to expect, how to react, etc. ... Scratch said he was going to try to get to the Jester 4 unit, a psychiatric unit that, according to Scratch, was

air conditioned, had hospital bunks that reclined with the push of a button, cable TV, great food and pretty nurses that treated you like a human. I asked him how to get to such a place? He said to play crazy and gave me a few ideas.

I really didn't want to leave my brother, but I felt like we'd soon be sent to different units as they rarely allow immediate family members to stay on the same farm. I was tired of the fields and hot dorms already, and Scratch said I wouldn't have to work if they admitted me at the psych unit. So, I told the psych doctor that I heard my dead uncle Wayne's voice and that the field horses were stealing my thoughts. I also mentioned depression and thoughts of suicide. The doctor put me on a bus the next day and I was shipped to the Skyview unit, one of three psych units in the TDCJ.

Skyview Unit-Coo-Coo For Cocoa Puffs

August of 1996 – July of 1997

An old lady with blue hair and a polka dotted smock greeted me at the front entrance to Skyview. A pungent mixture of Mentholatum and cigarette smoke hit me as she took my vitals and asked me a few questions. I was then stripped naked and placed into a small concrete suicide room with a piss drain in the center and given a 4x2 suicide blanket, nothing else.

I assumed the fetal position and cried myself to sleep.

A couple of days later I was given prison whites and escorted to a room with a team of five mental help professionals. They questioned me extensively and whispered amongst themselves. I played the role of a warped lunatic, going into great detail about hearing disembodied voices and seeing people when no one else could.

Several hours later I was taken to a regular cell, with bunk and mattress, toilet and window. I was allowed to wear clothes and eat regular food trays, but not much else.

I cursed Scratch. Where were the TVs? The reclining bunks? Sure, there were nurses, but not a one under 40 or easy on the eyes! Yes, there was air conditioning, but it wasn't anything like the hotel Scratch described. They did bring me a small bible and I read from it, then started feeling guilty about lying. I also missed my brother.

I decided to come clean. The next day I was taken before the treatment team and spoke coherently and articulately, I said I'd been lying, faking. I assured them I was as sane as any of them. The doctor asked, "Why'd you lie, Robert?"

"I was tired of the heat on Garza, the hard work and I was afraid of being raped or worse."

"Thank you for being honest," A female psychologist said. "It's sometimes difficult for us to determine who's faking and who's mentally ill."

They said I'd be released and returned to my unit of assignment within two weeks.

The next day I was called back in front of the treatment team. I was confused and angry when they said they'd changed their minds: I would be admitted to the hospital after all! I thought they meant to keep me in that cold cell, alone, with no property, so I vigorously protested: "I'm not crazy! I swear! Please send me back, I don't want to be here!"

They calmed me down and explained that I'd be moved upstairs to the regular wings, would get all my property, could recreate and watch TV with the other patients, even go outside and attend the various treatment programs. I asked why they'd keep me there if I wasn't crazy? They all conveyed sincere compassion as the doctor spoke. "Son, you are 16 years old and look closer to 13. We are admitting you under an adaptation disorder. We actually just made one up before you got in here, so you're the only one in the hospital with it! We feel like you can learn a little about prison life here from us and some of the older convicts who have been inside awhile. We'd like you to grow up some before you go out there into the war zones of a real farm."

I was moved upstairs that night into a 10x7 foot cell (still no reclining bunk!) and allowed to go to the dayroom. There were about 30 inmates of various ages and races watching TV, playing table games and intermingling. Most of them were obviously Coo Coo For Cocoa Puffs. One guy stood staring up at the light in the ceiling while drool ran down his chin. I laughed when someone ran up behind him and shook him screaming, "Don't look into the light, Carrolanne!" You know, from Poltergeist? Another dude said he was a lobster and crawled around the dayroom like one. An old Mexican named Johnny Rosales couldn't speak unless he rhymed. He was listening to a black man beg him for some coffee. The black dude said, "C'mon, Johnny! I'm yo friend!"

On cue Johnny said, "You wanna be my friend! let me stick it in!!!"

I knew right then I wasn't in Kansas anymore!

Not all of the inmates were psychotic. I met Shane soon after I arrived. He was several months older than me and had also been in jail since he was 15 years old. He was doing a Life sentence for capital murder under the 'law of parties' and had also been certified as an adult. He and his friends had kidnapped and robbed a guy and then killed him. Shane was white and incredibly small for 16 years old. He was highly intelligent and, at times, vocal and opinionated, but mostly he was shy and introverted. He later confided in me about being raped on Clemens Unit by black inmates, which is why he cut himself and landed on Skyview. We talked all the time and became best friends. We worked out together, hung out in the dayrooms watching TV, although sometimes it was much more entertaining watching the psych patients. We played chess every day, got jobs cleaning the wings and passing out food together and soon enrolled in education classes.

My focus on Skyview was two-fold: Get bigger and stronger in preparation for real prison and get educated for my return to the free world someday. By January of 1997 Shane and I both got G.E.Ds, and that Spring I completed a plumbing vocational course. Shane and I then got ourselves placed in college prep class so we could prepare to take

college academics after we left Skyview. We encouraged each other, had fun competing against each other and tried to stay focused on the important things in life.

When I first arrived in prison I was 5'-10" tall and weighed 140 lbs. soaking wet. After 11 months on Skyview, where I ate like a horse at my kitchen job, worked out six days a week on the weigh machine, worked jobs cutting grass, sweeping and mopping, loading and unloading laundry and playing full court basketball nearly every day, I had grown to about 6'-2" and 175 lbs, ripped with muscle and long-winded. I didn't have to work or go to school on Skyview, but they let me have as many jobs as I could handle, go to school and participate in the various programs there. An old school black dude named Willy had told me early on to immerse myself in prison life, to be the best at everything I set out to do and to not accept second place in anything. Obviously, I couldn't be the best at everything, but the point was to give my all in whatever I set out to do. I applied to his words at Skyview and every other farm I went to.

Prior to incorporating the get-tough-and-grow-in-everything attitude, I had some trouble at Skyview. A few weeks into my stay there I got into a fight with an 18 year old black dude over a game of dominos. He won the fight and I was placed in my cell. Alone, I began to step over the fight. I started to grind a plastic spoon on the ground so I'd have something just in case someone tried to do more than fight me, as the black kid had said. The guards caught me, though, and they stormed the cell and took it from me. I ended up with a major disciplinary case for possession of a weapon.

Not long after the fight, I got into trouble for selling coffee at a stamp a shot to Johnny Rosales. I was just hustling, trying to get by since I had no money coming in for commissary, but the staff thought I was exploiting the patients and I was discharged from the hospital. They said I'd be soon shipped back out into population.

Shane didn't want to see me go. Hell, I was nervous and still scared about going to population. I wasn't looking forward to fighting grown men on a regular basis, but I knew it was inevitable. Shane told me to take a shaving razor, break it down and slice my wrists with it. I should do it in front of the guards, he said, so the doctor would lift the discharge. I'd have to seem sincerely suicidal, Shane said.

Alone in my cell, I tentatively dragged the razor across my wrist. It stung, but I felt I had to be convincing so I cut deeper. A gash along my forearm bled profusely and hurt like hell. Yet as I watched the blood flow I reflected on the sad state of my life. I hadn't heard from my mom in awhile, and Ki had disappeared from my life several months back. I thought about that 99 years and the enormous weight of a life in prison. I was 17 years old and had to do 30 calendar years just to be eligible for parole. It sounded like an eternity to me. The next slash of the blade didn't hurt at all, it felt good to me. That burn offered potential release from all of my pain, and I sought it out with a blatant disregard for my life, slashing deeper and deeper, severing veins and an artery, blood squirting everywhere. I begged God for forgiveness as I tried to end it all right there.

A guard caught me. In no time my cell was crowded with staff and doctors and I was rushed downstairs to medical. They sewed me up and made sure I was physically stable, then they put me in five-point restraints. I was face down on a cold, steel bunk and, again, they put a football helmet on me. For twelve straight hours I remained there, a myriad of thoughts and emotions swirling through my head. I got mad at God and blamed Him for everything wrong in my life, then apologized and begged for mercy. I got angry at my father for putting me in prison. Finally I was mad at myself and wallowed in self-pity, crying and talking to myself, hating myself, wishing it all away.

After they removed the five-point restraints I was moved to a suicide room where I'd remain for eight days. It was so boring in there. I grew tired of eating peanut butter sandwiches, peeing in the floor and being cold. The treatment team finally let me out and readmitted me to the hospital. I was warned to leave the psych patients alone and put on antidepressants.

Shane and I shared a love for reading. We swapped books and discussed them regularly. We also read our bibles and went to church services twice a week. I felt like I was growing in so many ways on Skyview, after those early episodes, and again I abhorred the life I had lived prior to my arrest. I believed the moral teachings of the bible would help me improve my character and equip me for life beyond the walls one day. I certainly didn't want to be the person I had been ever again. Jesus, I believed, washed away all of my sins with his amazing sacrifices. I grew strong and felt protected with Him on my side.

During the summer of 1997 I told Shane I was ready to face the heat in population. He said I was crazy and I should just stay on Skyview as long as they'd let me. I'd been trying to toughen Shane up and help him get ready, but he didn't seem to be growing physically, and I could tell his heart wasn't ready to go do battle.

I was also tired of being treated like a psych patient, as if I had shit in my drawers. Everyone had to leave their housing area at 8am and couldn't return until 4pm because most were on medication and the doctor didn't want them sleeping all day. I worked multiple jobs 6 days a week and went to school and I wanted to sleep in on Sundays but couldn't. Plus, a lot of the guards and some of the convicts thought I was a weak catch out because I was there. In my heart I knew I would fight and wouldn't back down, and I was determined to prove that in population.

Connally Unit – A Gladiator Farm

July of 1997 – January of 1998

One night I was told to pack it up; I was on chain. I had no idea where I was going. It was dark as the Blue bird bus took me through the piney woods of East Texas. I recall

gazing out the window, wondering which farm I'd land on. The TDCJ tends to classify and assign inmates based on age and crime. I was sure I'd hit a youngster farm, somewhere rough. I was still a little nervous, but I swore to myself I would fade anything anyone brought me. Although I continued to have high hopes my appeals would change my sentence, my mentality was that I had 99 years and might not ever get out so the worst thing anyone could do was kill me; they would have to do just that before I allowed anyone to run me over. I was bigger and stronger than ever and I had something to prove to everyone: Robert Pruett ain't goona be anyone's punk or bitch.

We picked inmates up along the way to the Walls Unit. The concrete enclosure of the Walls Unit reminded me of the movie 'The Shawshank Redemption', but the staff and inmates there were mostly cool people. They walked us to the chow hall and loaded our trays with more than even I could eat. We were placed in cells to spend the night and I ended up with an old school white dude who had about ten bags of legal work. All he wanted to do was complain about the system and strategize about ways to fight back. After he heard my story he got emotional and said, "Youngster, the best thing you can do is live in the law library. Fight these whore with everything you got! Give them that goddamn sentence back!"

I'd been studying the law on Skyview and I continued to frequent the law library over the next couple of years.

The next day I was shipped to the Darrington Unit, another transit unit, an in between farm to wherever I'd be assigned. Waves of mosquitoes swarmed us from the bus to the old brick buildings, a good 300 yard walk. Inside, it was hot and humid as we made our way down a long hallway with cell blocks on either side. Black inmates crowded the bars to these wings as we passed, whistling catcalls at me and another white dude from the chain bus. One bald headed and charcoal skinned black dude got excited when he saw me. "Oow-Wee! Look at dat pretty white boy wit da silky blonde hair! I love you, white boy! I hope you come to my wing, pretty white boy!"

"Suck a white dick, bitch!" I told my admirer. He screamed threats at me as the guard told us to keep it moving. We were taken to the chow hall to eat before being celled up for the night. The phrase 'white boy' is blatant disrespect in Texas prisons. 'White boys' are weak, they pay for protection with their ass, mouth or commissary; they have no respect. A white man who stays down, fights for himself and his race, is called a Peckerwood or 'Wood. You gotta earn your Wood status in here. I wasn't going to be anybody's white boy.

I knew my cousin Ronnie was permanently assigned to Darrington, so while I was in the chow hall I asked a kitchen worker if he knew him? He did and soon Ronnie appeared from the back of the kitchen. We got to talk for about ten minutes, catch up with each other, and he said it was possible but unlikely that I'd be assigned to Darrington. Most of

the dudes there were 35 and over. We hugged and said our goodbyes and I was placed in a cell by myself for the night.

After breakfast, sometime around 4am, a chain officer showed up on the wing calling dudes' names out with their unit of assignment. I stood at my door anxiously until my name was called. "Pruett, # 754890?"

"Here I am, boss."

"Connally Unit, Kennedy, Texas. Be ready in an hour."

An old school black dude in the cell next to me, a dude I'd conversed with throughout the night, said, "Dammit youngster! I'm sorry, man. They rockin and rollin down there on the Connally. Be ready when you get there; they damn sho gone test yo heart."

We pulled into the Connally unit early that morning. The unit opened its doors in 1995. It was considered a Gladiator Farm because it houses mostly trouble making youngsters from other maximum security farms. They love to fight, play kid games and keep the shit stirred up. By the time I arrived, there had been many deadly gang wars, frequent rioting, countless murders and rapes and it was widely considered the most dangerous unit in the system.

Convicts love to give units nicknames. Eastham is 'The Ham;' 'Burn in Hell' aptly describes Clemens unit with its windowless brick buildings down in the swamps by the Brazos river; There were many killings and riots on the 'Terrible Terrell' (Now the Polunsky) when it first opened; A unit like Connally is said to be 'rockin and rooin' because of the high level of violence, so they called the Connally 'The Rockin Connally.'

Two razor wire fences surrounded the compound of three tired buildings. The outside rec yards were crowded with convicts in white playing basketball, lifting weights and playing handball. All eyes were on the four of us who stepped off the bus, sizing us up. Most of the inmates there looked young and menacing, in tip top shape, and I tried my best to remain calm. I thought I was doing a good job of it.

In prison, there are countless predators and they constantly watch everyone, searching for any sign of weakness that might be exploited. How you carry yourself and behave will determine whether some will focus on you. Most predators prefer to attack the weakest people possible so they don't have to force them into what they want; they try to talk a dude out of everything with fear tactics. Yet there are those who love to fight and get their thrills out of breaking dudes who will fight. It's a game to them to see how many they can 'turn out,' or make pay some form of protection. The predators are the ones most focused on the new boots in prison, but everyone is keeping an eye on you, wondering how you'll react to the pressure that the predators will put on you.

One of the first things you notice about prisons in Texas is they are racially divided. On any given rec yard or dayroom you notice the various races separated, talking amongst themselves. Of course you have dudes of every race who socialize and do business with people of every race, and sometimes deep friendships occur between the races, but

generally the races separate inside these gates. I was taught by older convicts to be loyal to my race, to be present during racial conflicts and to fight during race riots. Refusal to support your own race results in their refusal to support you if you are targeted by the other races, which is almost inevitable if they think you don't have the backing of your own race.

This division of races was readily apparent as I carried my mattress and property to my cell. One of the dudes I drove up with, a black militant Muslim, was my cellie. He asked me if I was alright after I shoved all of my stuff into my locker and tied my key to my ankle under my sock. I had heard about dudes being knocked out and getting their keys snatched off their necks and their property stolen; that wasn't about to happen to me. I told my cellie, "Man, I know these boys are gonna check my paper; I'm getting ready."

To have your paper or card checked simply means to fight and prove your manhood in Texas' prisons.

I fell out into the dayroom. All three tiers of cells on each section surround the dayroom. A group of 30 or more blacks were under and around the TV area, eyes shooting darts in my direction, some whispering amongst themselves. About 20 Hispanics, Esses as we call them, sat at the tables and benches to my right, sizing me up. Maybe 10 white dudes convened at two tables in the center of the dayroom, watching me closely. I calmly walked to an empty table and sat facing the dayroom, ready for whatever. An older white dude in his 50s and clearly the mouthpiece of the Woods approached me first. He extended his hand. "Hey, youngster. I'm Rusty."

"I'm Pruett." I shook his hand. "How y'all do it around here? Who's gonna check me?"

"Huh?" Rusty looked quizzical at first, then it dawned on him. "Oh, we don't exactly do things that way on this side of the farm. You will be tested, sure, but there's no system as to who or when. Now, if you get rolled to the other side of the farm, medium or close custody, they check you before you ever reach your cell. Could be days over here on Minimum custody. Just be ready and don't ever quit, you hear me? Fight hard and we got your back;" He nodded to the wood pile behind him. "Break weak and the niggers and meskins will fight over you."

Rusty then introduced me to the wood pile.

Later that day a lanky black youngster with a tear drop tattoo under his eye asked me about my shoes. I already knew from the county that someone would try to take my shoes. Tear Drop said I could 'ride' with him for my shoes. To ride with someone in prison means they protect you and become their property. I wasn't going to be anyone's property. Before Tear Drop could finish his spiel my fist smashed into his mouth. Suddenly we were surrounded by inmates so the guards couldn't see the fight. I held my own, going blow-for-blow with him, busting his lip and dazing him once with a strong left hook. He knocked me down once and I got back up and swung with him some more. He got the

better of me, but he damn sure knew I'd been there. That's really what counts in here: fight as hard as you can and demand your respect at all costs.

Rusty bear-hugged me after the fight. "Youngster, I ain't gonna lie. When I first saw you my heart sank. I just knew you'd be someone's wife. I'm proud of you, Pruett! Glad you proved me wrong."

In the five months that I lived on Connally unit in 1997 I got into just a handful of fights. As far as fist fights go it wasn't nearly as bad as they made it out to be, certainly nothing like the Harris County Jail where we fought daily. In fact, Harris County wasn't as rough as the chiefs had made it seem either. No one ever got raped or stabbed in the juvenile tanks. And TDJC didn't match the war stories I'd heard from the county jail either. Yes, the TDCJ was extremely violent, but I learned that as long as you fight, never back down from anyone, gain your respect and mind your own business, well, it's not so bad. I always tell dudes that as long as you're a man and you demand your respect, you'll be alright. Of course you're going to fight; it's prison! You've just gotta show the predators you don't take shit off anyone and they will back off and hone in on weak prey.

A couple of Woods named Batman and Kevin had a large influence on me on Connally. They were tattooed everywhere and self-proclaimed skinheads, although they were not in a family or gang. They claimed to be "independent peckerwoods who encourage and support young woods and school them not to cave in to the niggers and meskins." They also warned me against joining prison gang. The white gangs are filled with dudes who can't stand on their own two feet, even though they think they're woods. The leaders exploit their soldiers, get them to do their dirty work and use them for their money. Besides, you are obligated to fight during gang wars and you will most likely end up doing decades in administrative segregation (Ad Seg), so it's senseless to patch up with a gang in my opinion. Back in the days, in the 1980s, when the white and Hispanic families were formed, it was essential for them to come together and keep the black inmates from raping and robbing them. Today, the families are more about organized crime than solidarity, at least the white ones are.

Batman and Kevin had all these views on Jews and minorities. Some of it didn't quite catch at the time. Kevin talked about racial politics in the free world, how the 'mud races' were diluting 'our pure white gene pool;' Batman got fired up over the race relations in prison. He couldn't stand a weak ass white boy, the cowards who'd rather fuck than fight. They were beyond indignant over the fact that it's usually the whites who get checked by blacks and Hispanics. The Esses do not like anyone checking their people. It happens sometimes to those who are young and unaffiliated, but those in families, or those who are Tango Blast, which are groups from certain cities who stick together, never have to fight to prove themselves. If the blacks tried checking one of them the Esses would come together and start stabbing them. Blacks get checked, but it's usually the young, bright-skinned ones and those not gang related. All whites are checked and this was a sore spot

for Batman and Kevin. They talked about reverse racism, how whites are the minority in prison and often targeted by the predators, and how we need to come together like the Esses and smash on anyone who tried to exploit one of our own.

A lot of Batman's and Kevin's views stuck with me and I drew upon them over the years. Back then, I absorbed my environment.

My first job on Connally was in the fields. Unlike Garza West, the fields weren't so bad on Connally. I'd gained some respect and enjoyed chopping it up with the woods in my squad. I felt a sense of camaraderie with them. We told jokes (usually racial ones) and swapped prison stories. I was in the best shape of my life and didn't mind the hard labor or the blazing sun; it only made me stronger.

I was surprised when I was reassigned to the laundry just a month later. They had me on the folding table for about a month and a half, then I got a job change into the kitchen. They put me in the dish room, which was pretty easy work. I got to eat as much as I wanted, which was awesome since I wasn't making commissary and I needed the protein because I was working out five days a week.

I stayed very active on Connally. When the outside rec yard opened I hit the weight machine. I'd been working out regularly on Skyview with Shane and my other friends so I was pretty strong by Connally Unit. I recall standing in line for the bench press and when it came my turn I told the spotter to place the pin at the bottom of the stack. That was a 350 lbs stack, but on a universal weight machine you subtract about 30 pounds. Still, those dudes started laughing at my slim ass when I asked for the stack. I only weighed about 180 lbs then, but I was solid muscle. They weren't laughing when I pumped the stack five straight times; they started calling me "Nature boy!"

Handball fascinated me. Almost invariably, the handball courts are dominated by whites and Esses, although you'll find a few blacks who play. I liked how the game improved my speed, stamina and hand-eye-coordination. All of which were important for prison brawls. I learned the basics of the game on Connally, but I was clumsy and uncoordinated over there. On McConnell, the following year, I played 4-5 hours per day, every day, for two straight years and dominated the courts. I can count on two fingers how many people on the 3,000 man unit who were better than me. I was passionate and intense on the court, as I was with everything I did.

My faith in Jesus grew stronger than ever on Connally. I read the bible and attended church services with Rusty. Kevin said Christianity was a Jewish conspiracy created to subjugate the white masses; Batman said weak ass white people tend to hide behind the bible in prison. Batman said his mom was the most loving and compassionate person he ever met and she was a Christian. He became emotional when he asked, "Where the fuck was Jesus when she was dying a painful death of cancer?! How could a 'just and loving God' allow someone like her to suffer like that, dude?!"

I didn't have an answer.

I did have questions on my own. Rusty was a Christian. He was older, wiser and very intelligent. I asked him about the scripture that tells us to turn the other cheek and love thy enemies. “How can we do that in prison, Rusty?”

Rusty was a pro boxer. I watched him knock out dudes half his age. He knocked one black youngster out for invading his space and that dude had to go to the hospital. He knocked another dude out for arguing with him about the bible. He looked at me sincerely as he answered. “Youngster, let me tell you something: The bible says do not spare the rod with your children. Sometimes even a grown man needs to be spanked.”

I loved his interpretation of scripture!

In November of 1997 I spoke with a lady from education. They didn’t offer college academics on Connally, but they could transfer me somewhere that did. Initially, she was reluctant to do that for me because I had 99 years. The TDCJ tries to reserve its educational programs for those close to release. I became emotional and even shed a tear as I said, “Ma’am, I was 15 years old when I came in and didn’t even make it to high school. I’m trying hard to stay out of trouble and prepare myself for the free world because I believe my conviction will be overturned. All I want to do is learn and grow as much as I can in preparation for that someday. Please let me go to school. “

She put in the paperwork and in January 1998 I was transferred to the McConnell Unit in Beeville, Texas.

McConnell Unit – Assimilating into the Prison Lifestyle

January of 1998 – December of 1999

Every TDCK unit has a unique character and attitude. Connally unit was oppressive and aggressive. The guards there were mostly disciplinarians and scamps; they ran a tight ship and were prone to verbally and physically abusing unruly inmates. Couple that with the predominantly young and aggravated inmates and you can almost cut the tension with a knife it was so palpable. McConnell unit was architecturally identical to Connally, but it was run differently. Most of the officers there spoke to the inmates with respect, and there were more older convicts to keep the youngsters in line, creating a more laid back atmosphere. I knew dudes who’d been on McConnally when it opened in 1992, but about 4 years later, after all the gang wars and killings subsided, it mellowed out some. Regardless, it was still a maximum security farm and a young white dude like myself had lots to prove.

I was shipped to McConnell with several others from Connally. We went before UCC the first day there to receive housing and job assignments. A woman from classification

turned to the warden after reviewing my file. “He hasn’t had a disciplinary in over a year and he’s here for college. I say put him in the dorms.”

“Um, excuse me,” I’d heard about the dorms. No privacy at all; you use the toilet, shower and everything else in front of 100 other dudes. On the buildings you had only one person to deal with: your cellie. Plus, you could shower in single shower stalls on each run. “If you don’t mind I prefer to live on a building.”

The warden assigned me to 3 building and gave me a job in the kitchen. I was a pot washer at first. It’s hard work, scrapping off burnt grease stains with boiling hot water, but all of the leftover food came straight to the pot room first so we could eat our fill and bag up and sell whatever we thought we could get away with. On McConnell everyone in the kitchen started off in the pot room and had to work their way up to better jobs. Typically, you have to work several jobs for months and years before you can get a really good job like the kitchen commissary (where you load and unload the trucks that bring the unit all its kitchen supplies and food) or ODR (Officers Dining Room). One of my coworkers in the pot room jumped straight to the OCR after just 6 weeks in the pot room and I ignorantly called him a snitch. How else could he make such a leap? I apologized to him a month later when I made the same jump! Apparently they’d fired the last ODR crew and were looking for clean cut and well spoken inmates to work in the ODR.

On 3 building I got an older black cellie, a Christian dude who really didn’t like me from the start. That’s probably because I was beginning to seriously question the Christian doctrine. So many things weren’t adding up to me about the bible. Because my cellie was a Christian and much older than me, I presented my questions to him and he grew incredibly frustrated with me because he didn’t have any answers. Within months I abandoned the faith in Christianity, but back then my cellie and I had long arguments that resulted in us not speaking to each other for days. When he did talk to me he always seemed to find flaws in how I lived, the way I made my bed, how I stored my property, how I cleaned etc... He copped an attitude with me over every little minor detail and got loud with me a few times.

Once, right after necessities had rolled through with clean sheets, I stood at the door and allowed him space to put his sheets on his mattress. He then sat on the edge of his bunk (the bottom) while I tried to work around him and put my sheets on my mattress on the top bunk. He snapped at me and said I was disrespectful for not asking him to move first. That was my breaking point with the dude. I blew up on him and told him to put his shoes on while I put a curtain up over our door so we could fight. He was shorter than me and a lot thicker, but I was longer, quicker, in better shape and, by then, damn good with my hands. He hung with me for a few blows, then I worked him into the corner and wore him out.

We shook hands afterwards and he apologized for being hard to live with. I felt guilty and wondered if I’d jumped the gun? No, I hadn’t. He’d disrespected me by yelling at me

and the Woods and predators were following my every move, monitoring the situation in our cell. Had I allowed my cellie to continue to speak to me like that it would've been looked upon as a sign of weakness and opened the door to a really hard road for me. In prison, any perceived disrespect must be dealt with immediately.

From that moment forward I gave every cellie of mine a speech. The idea was to avoid future problems. It went something like this: "Here's the deal: I only have one real rule. No jacking off when I'm in the cell with you. Besides that, when you are in the cell by yourself, it's your cell. When I'm in here alone, it's my cell. When we are in here together, it's our cell and we must respect each other. I will clean up any mess I make and I expect the same from you. We can work out a cleaning schedule for sweeping and washing the floor and toilet. How's one day I do it, the next it's on you sound? Basically, we just got to respect each other while we're in here together and we'll get along fine."

I was fortunate to have really cool cellies after that first guy.

The Woods embraced me after I beat my cellie up. They had lots of questions for me, though: Why'd I let my cellie get away with talking loud to me for so long? He was a Christian and so was I; I thought we could talk it out. What's up with all the scars on my arm? Was I catch out? No, I wasn't catch out. I'd fight anyone who gets out of line. I cut myself on Skyview to stay there with a friend; it got out of hand. Am I interested in joining a family? They were White Knights and wanted to protect me. I wasn't interested. I was an independent peckerwood who could stand on his own feet and faded all heat.

Period.

My scars caused me a lot of trouble in prison. To attempt suicide is considered weakness. They think it means you can't make it, you'll fold under pressure and you're an easy target. Twice on Connally I fought black inmates because they saw my scars and honed in on me. One of them was Freddy Kruger. He was playing dominos as I stood by watching. He made a comment like "look at the cuts on that ho-ass white boy." I called him out to three row and beat his ass.

Batman and Kevin swelled with pride.

Another predator who tried to exploit me on Connally was Head. He's what we call a 'booty bandit'. He was tall, muscular and had spent the previous 20 years in prison preying on the weak. I was walking back from chow when Batman said, "Damn, dude! Did you see the way that toad (a term for blacks in prison) looked at you? Like you was a double meat cheeseburger!"

I turned in time to see a bald black head disappear into the chow hall. Several days later I felt someone's eyes on me while in the hallway. It was Head. I cut out of line and approached him. "Say, you know me, man?"

"Oh yeah, I think I saw you on the transfer unit... which one was it? What's your name again?"

He hadn't been on a transfer unit his entire life; they didn't have them when he came in. This was just his way of starting a conversation, opening the door to play his mind games. Some of the predators in here are extremely manipulative and very crafty with their games. I said, "You don't know me, dude. I ain't comfortable when you stare at me. Out of respect I'm asking you to stop it."

Head lived on a different building and I never saw him again on Connally. A part of me was relieved when I got transferred to McConnell because I knew Head and I were in for a collision. When I saw Head walk past the ODR shortly after I got that job on McConnell, I was surprised. I later found out that he tried his mind games on a young wood named Cracker on Connally and Cracker snuck up behind him and beat his head in with a plastic pitcher in the chow hall. They shipped Head to McConnell.

Apparently, Head hadn't learned his lesson. He began staring at me again. He worked in the main kitchen and I jammed him up back there, told him I'm not the one to play with. He laughed at me and said something about an understanding beats the world and, "We both got a lot of time. Ain't no reason we can't do this time together."

I hit him with everything I had. I busted his mouth and nose and drove him against the ice machine with a flurry of punches. But he was an experienced prison boxer, much bigger and stronger than me and he came out on top. Still, if you would've placed us side-by-side after the fight, it was obvious he got the worst of it. The guards caught us and separated it, though. Otherwise, I would have been smashed.

They locked us up in 11 building in PHD (pre-hearing detention) cells to await court. Back there Head said he knew I was a ho and catch out because of the scars on my arm. For three days straight he and I cursed each other out behind the locked doors. I tried to ignore him and conversed with a wood from the trustee camp who'd been locked up for cigarettes. We sang songs and Head jumped in and sang, "I'm Gonna Keep on Loving You" Reo Speedwagon. He said that's our song and I'd be his wife if I didn't catch out and came back to population. He believed I would request protection and a transfer. The main reason why that wasn't an option is I was taught to never run from anyone. Practically speaking, though, if you request protection they will either transfer you to another unit where your past inevitably follows you and once word gets out that you caught out on one farm the predators will devour you;. Or, they can put you in protective custody, but that's a life in administrative segregation where you spend 23 hours a day, back then, in a cell alone. That's no way to do 99 years.

Head had me fucked up. I'm no catch out.

It was sorta funny when, later that night, a radio on the transit side of the building came on playing that Reo Speedwagon song and Head screamed to me, "It's a sign! It's a sign! There's our song! We meant to be together, baby!"

They released me back to population first. I asked an old school wood for a shank and he told me, no. He knew Head from another unit and said Head was just checking me in

his own way. I had fought Head and fought him hard and he wouldn't bother me again. The old wood said, "If he so much looks at you when he gets out of 11 building I'll give you a shank to handle your business."

Head never looked my way again. He avoided me if our paths were about to cross. I watched him target other young white dudes, though. It sickened me. Predators of his caliber stalk their prey, and many give in to their advances.

In my opinion, sexual predators, as a general rule, have repressed sexual desires and/or memories. It's no wonder to me why some priests, after years of repressing their sexuality, molest kids. Those stuck out at sea for months have been known to turn to a man for release, something some of them normally wouldn't do. Many of the crusaders sent into the Holy Lands, where they were without sex for years sometimes, raped the women and children in the cities they raided. In prison it's a similar story. Dudes engage in homosexuality because they are tired of their hand. Now take someone who's a conditioned predator, someone who has bullied kids throughout school and is used to taking what they want, and then throw them in prison for many years and they just might turn into what we call a booty bandit.

About 6 months after I fought Head, I fought another booty bandit. This one was much more aggressive. He ran his fingers through my hair and called me a "pretty ass white boy". I punched him in the throat and he dropped to his knees, then I kicked him in the face.

Like Head, he never messed with me again.

Something had to be done about the scars on my arm. They were drawing way too much unwanted attention. I met a tattooist named Twitch. He had some sort of nervous disorder that made him constantly twitch his head. He promised it didn't affect his tattooing skills. I paid him 3 bags of coffee to put a huge tribal piece with a swastika over the bulk of my scars, then later he put more tribal pieces and killer clowns over the rest of the scars.

The point of the swastika was to show the woods I was down for my race. I didn't get it because I agreed with Batman and Kevin about the Jews. My mom's father was a Jew. To me, swastikas and lightning bolts conveyed to the other races that I was a wood and not to be messed with.

You have to earn racial tattoos in prison, I soon discovered. A Mexican from San Antonio asked me on the rec yard if I even knew what the swastika meant? I said, "It means I'm a wood."

"Oh yeah?" He replied. "Because you look like a white boy to me!"

When his homeboys had to pull me off of him to keep me from smashing his face into the concrete any further, he knew I wasn't any kind of white boy, you can bet that.

About a year after Twitch and I met he showed me he wasn't a wood. Another white dude got into a fight with a Crip in the section over from where I lived. He and Twitch

came into the section and the white dude ran up to the shower to clean up, where we later found his soiled boxers, then he closed his cell door on in the in-and-out (the officers open and close the doors so dudes can go in their cells and get things they need, then come back out on the 'out' if they want.).

From his cell the white dude told me and a couple other woods that he was clicked on by several Crips. Twitch said it was just one Crip and he knocked the white dude out. I was simply inquiring what had happened. Because the way I was raised in here, you don't allow a wood to be clicked on, raped or stabbed in your presence. It's unacceptable. If Twitch had let that happen he had to be dealt with and so did Crips who did it. During my inquiry a Crip in my dayroom stood up and asked me if I had a problem with it? He then banged on the door to the next section and yelled through it, "This wood over here got a problem with the shit when down over there!"

Twitch slipped out the door during the section change (there's three sections to a pod with 24 cells each. Each section has a dayroom and TV. Back then they did 'section changes' so you could go see what was on the TV in the other dayrooms on your pod) just before the 15 or so Crips stormed my section. They isolated me and the other woods, separating us as a riot broke off. It only lasted for about two minutes, and the guards in the picket never even saw it but it was long enough for them to bust us pretty good.

Afterwards, they wanted to talk about. An older Crip that I knew and respected apologized for the misunderstanding after I vehemently said I was just asking what had happened. He swore it was a one-on-one fight, that the white dude got knocked out and fell into a trash can. The Crip in my section had jumped the gun and misunderstood my questioning. I called him out to the shower and we fought one-on-one. He stayed out of my business after I showed him up in front of his homeboys. That squashed the situation between us and the Crips.

It didn't squash what Twitch had done: he left us alone in the dayroom to fight the Crips. I found him in the commissary line. He had been on restriction for months and didn't even have any money; why was he in the commissary line? I slapped the shit out of him and treated him like a white boy from that day on.

In the two years that I was on McConnell I covered most of my left arm with tattoos, a quarter of my right arm and a third of my back. It's mostly wicked looking pieces, stuff that I thought looked cool and vicious. I wanted to appear tough and dangerous to the rest of the inmates, but I looked so young that the tattoos never really expressed it to anyone.

My actions certainly did, though.

Penitentiary Hustlers

Since my father and brother were in prison and my mother had to depend on others to survive, I had no way to use the commissary. All that the TDCJ provides its inmates is the bare minimum: state soap, shaving razors, clean clothes and tooth powder. The state soap burns most dudes' skin and the toothpowder is better for indigestion than cleaning teeth. If you want toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, writing supplies, a radio, fan or various other food items, you've gotta have money in your trust fund account. The state doesn't pay its inmates so if you don't have outside support you're in trouble.

Most dudes in prison have a hustle, or a way to make money for their basic necessities. Some dudes draw and sell their art, some tattoo, wash clothes, make big bars of soap out of state soap and shampoo (the state soap is smaller than a match box), and there's the craft shop where dudes piddle with leather, do wood work, or some other form of art, but you need money to get started in here.

I had a variety of hustles while in general population. When I worked in the laundry I sold new state clothes, made deals with the sewing machine operators to stitch up dudes' personal clothing, sold soap and bleach. In the kitchen I stole cheese, peanut butter, jalapeños, tortillas and anything else I could sell to other prisoners. When I was on the paint crew I sold paint to the artists and paint thinner to those who wanted to kill billions of brain cells at a time.

Once I got my ODR job I stepped my game up. I would make egg and cheese omelet sandwiches on toast bread and send them to prisoners in ad seg and close custody, then take what was leftover back to my pod to sell. My only problem was finding ways to get through the security check points. There's a guard at every gate and they are supposed to pat search all passing inmates. Most of these guards knew me since I cooked their breakfast, along with the wardens and administration. These guards weren't allowed to take food from the ODR, and they were only allowed to take one 20 minutes break in there per shift. So I bribed some of them. I'd find out which guard worked each station between the ODR and my house and call their stations (we had a phone in the ODR that connected to inside lines only, unless the central controller allowed for outside lines, but we never dared.) and ask them if they would let me pass for a few on my famous omelet sandwiches. I'd strap food around my thighs and waist and make my way back to the building if I thought I could get through.

Another trick I used to pass security was rolling a trash can with food at the bottom and trash up top past the turn out station as if I was taking out the trash. I'd have someone in 4 building drop a fishing line through the window and they'd pull everything into the building that way. Stealing from my jobs helped me get the basic necessities, writing supplies, coffee and commissary food.

Unfortunately, I lost my ODR job twice. The first time I made fun of a smart mouthed lieutenant. He went and told the captain on me and I was sent to the fields. The kitchen captain liked me, though, and he gave me my job back after just 30 days. Then, around the Spring of 1999, the warden and major caught me masturbating in the privacy of my own cell. The Warden changed my job back to the fields because, I presume, he didn't want me touching his food.

Unlike Connally, McConnell was wide open. By that I mean it was possible to sneak from one building to the next if you had any kind of game about you. I knew various tricks to get myself out to the dorms to play handball, get tattooed or whatever. When I was on the other side of the farm on 7 and 8 buildings I could easily get to the job side, where all the minimum security inmates live, to take care of business. Because of my ability to do this, I also made money taking bags of commissary from one building to the next for a transport fee. Dudes who owed others lots of commissary used to come to me to get their stuff moved.

Sports was another hustle of mine. On Skyview my friend Marty got me into football. He said there's money in knowledge of the game. I didn't really get into it until McConnell, but there I spent a lot of time studying newspapers, sports magazines and watching the games, looking for every edge I could get to gamble on. A friend of mine named BC ran a ticket for the NFL and he let me push tickets for him and paid me 25% of everything I brought in.

I also gambled with dominos. We played games like Big 6, knock, poker, moon and 42 with the dominos. I had to be selective who I gambled with because most dudes that gamble are black and the majority of black gamblers, in my experience, try to run game or cheat anyone they feel like they can get over on. This is why most whites and Hispanics don't even gamble in prison; it could bring unnecessary problems. I didn't have enough money coming in and I wasn't afraid to fight, so I gambled.

After O learned to read the dominos and many strategies to winning, I'd find a gambling table and get in on the games. My advantage was being young and white and playing the role of an easy mark. I pretended to be inexperienced and I bated dudes into making mistakes they normally wouldn't, then I took their money. Some got mad at me after losing and tried to jack me - keep the money - or disrespect me, thinking a fight squashed all bets. No, not with me it didn't. Win, lose or draw I want my money.

A black youngster called Big Chest tried to jack me after running up a \$ 40 debt with me. He gave me the run around for a week before I woke him up at 7am and told him to put his boots on. On the 'in' of the in-and-out I went into his cell, busted his ass, and took the money.

Situations like that earned me a tremendous amount of respect and a reputation. Once, I had left about \$ 70 of BC's money tied to a table in my dayroom as my section left the pod to go to lunch. I believed my reputation was strong enough to do such a thing by then.

Yet, as we hit the main hallway I noticed two black dudes fall out of line and head back to the building. I told my homeboys I had to go back to the pod; something just didn't feel right. Those two saw me following them and stopped to ask, "Why ain't you going to chow, Young Pruett?"

"Better question: why ain't y'all going to chow.

They said they were just going back to smoke a cigarette. I didn't believe them. They had a look about them, as if they'd been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. I made a decision. "Ok, I'm going to chow. But if I return to the pod and my shit ain't there I'm stabbing someone."

They were defensive, swore they'd never do such a thing to me, acted offended that I thought they would. I said, "My bad, homez. Look, if y'all are going back, how 'bout keeping an eye on my shit? Preciate it."

You gotta do what you gotta do in here, and hustling comes with its consequences.

Self-Educated

My desire to learn and improve upon myself grew on McConnell unit. I had to take a college entry test before I could enroll at Bee County College; the community college sent professors to the prison to teach. It was the toughest test I'd ever taken in my life, but I passed it and got a grant and soon was in college.

I took a reading course with a really sweet old lady who loved to converse with the class. We'd spend over an hour talking and invariably stray far away from the original point of conversation. She said, "We learn more from our digressions than the main topics, usually."

Mr Silva taught U.S. History Before 1865. He helped ignite my love for history as he took us through the middle ages, the crusades, and other events that led up to the Europeans discovering America. When the class first started I made a bet with another inmate in the class that I'd score higher than he would in the class. The bet was in fun, just for additional motivation, and it was made after several dudes said the guy was easily the smartest in the class. We both aced every test and it came down to the final test. He made a mistake on the very last bonus question, which counted in our bet, and I won! I made him pay me my push ups once we left the school building and hit the main hallway. It was so much fun beating him because he really was smarter than me, he just made a simple mistake.

Psychology 101 was one of my favorite classes. Human behavior intrigued me. After taking the class I read books on the pioneers of psychology like William Wundt, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Jung, CJ Watson and BF Skinner. I then delved into books on population biology, behavioral genetics, sociology, anthropology, evolutionary psychology and

anything related to behavioral sciences. I wanted to understand the general human psyche so I could better understand myself, where I came from, how I became the person I was and how I could become better. My studies induced deep introspective journeys and reflections on my past. I began to grasp how growing up in poverty affected my behavior. I became illuminated on the effects of popular culture, music and role models of every sort, how and why kids tend to emulate those they admire and why it's crucial for kids to have positive role models, I learned how some traits are genetically transferred, such as aggression and addictive personality disorder, but that genes don't issue tyrannical commands; we can learn to control our genetic impulses and alter our predispositions with the right conditioning.

Psychology taught me so much about the human condition, our childhood traumas and complexes that need to be resolved, and it truly helped me understand why I behaved the way I did prior to my arrest. I had put myself, my ego, above everyone else. The environment I was raised in was conducive to my criminality. I used drugs to numb my mind and ease the burden of my existence, then became addicted and committed crimes to feed the destructive cycle that was my life. Obviously, my parents were ill-equipped and had no clue about child development as they let me get high with them. Yet, psychology helped me better understand them, their pasts and why they had such a hard go of it, even though they had all of the love in the world for their children.

My growing understanding of humans also helped me thrive in my prison environment. It's crucial to be able to read people in here. Dudes are constantly approaching you to do some sort of business, and sometimes it's not easy to discern their intentions. Is this dude trying to run game? Am I being manipulated out of something? What's his angle? How can I reverse the situation and manipulate it to my advantage? Such was how my life went in here.

Every chance I got I visited the prison library. Each building had a certain day to go to the library, but I managed to get myself in there at least four times per week. Though I had a full schedule, I made time to read every day. I took books to work and read on my spare time; I read in the dayroom with my head propped up against my cell in between other activities, plus I read every morning before I left the cell and every night before I crashed out.

Ms Menn, a middle-aged teacher who genuinely cared about inmate rehabilitation, allowed me to take her college prep class. I used that time to study for college, read my books and tutor other inmates. She taught me so many valuable life lessons. We built a strong rapport, sorta like a mother-child bond, and she even testified on my behalf in my 2002 capital murder trial. She said, "Robert was always so respectful in my classes. He was hyperactive, but a good kid. He didn't have many chances in life."

She testified through tears, and I couldn't help but cry myself.

Some of the Woods commended me on my achievements and my general pursuit of knowledge and understanding. I truly appreciated their accolades, but one instance in the wood pile stands out. I was telling them about something I'd learned when a dude named Cliff joked, "That sure is gonna come in handy when you're out there for steppin in the fields."

We all laughed, yet inside, it struck a chord. Would I ever get out of prison and be afforded an opportunity to apply the things I was learning? Would the state allow me to prove I was a changed man? It made me incredibly sad to think the answers were in the negative; I would very likely die in prison.

One of the dumbest rules in prison is you can't go to school if you have received any major disciplinary reports within the last 6 months. That's why I kept getting kicked out on McConnell. I got fighting cases, cases for stealing food from the kitchen, and even gambling cases. Isn't the idea to help prisoners rehabilitate by educating them? Why discontinue their education because they got into trouble? Just goes to show that the TDCJ doesn't care about rehabilitation.

A Guardian Angel

One day I got into a fight with a black Muslim. He called me a ho-ass white boy because I sat next to a drawing of his, which was placed on the table where my friend displayed his artwork. I called him to three row shower and knocked him out cold.

The Muslims and Crips weren't happy about the fight. Most black dudes can't stand to see a white dude beat up one of theirs in here, much less knock him out. The tension mounted as the day wore on. The esses thought I knocked him out with a canned good; the black thought another wood helped me, but the dude I beat up knew what happened. We all thought a race riot might kick off, though.

I went to the outside yard after lunch. I spoke with the dude I knocked out and another Muslim and left the conversation thinking it was squashed. I played handball for a few hours before leaving the yard to go get my necessities.

In the laundry line I stood next to an Asian youngster with a huge dragon tattooed around his body. I remember seeing him out there playing basketball with the Crips. He turned to me and whispered, "Say, Wood. It's none of my business, but I wouldn't go outside tonight if I were you. The blacks got cans and shanks and they plan to hit you."

That was the first and last day I'd ever saw that Asian dude. When I later asked people if they recalled seeing him, no one knew who I was talking about.

After the Asian alerted me to the situation I went to get a shank and warn the other woods. You don't run from trouble in here; you meet it head on. I fell out to the rec yard that night with several other woods and waited for a confrontation. The Crips and

Muslims showed up and I watched them talk amongst themselves for a while and look over at us a few times. I'm sure they knew we were aware of their plan and we were packing heat. The leader of the Muslims, a dude named Big Austin, walked up towards us and called me over for a one-to-one talk. I'd hung out with him before, gambled with him and liked the dude. He was cool people, but this was business. He stuck his hand out and said, "Young Pruett, I talked to my brothas and we gone let that mess go."

Already.

Had that mysterious Asian not alerted me I might've been alone and unprepared, and those dudes might've not changed their minds. I think they saw us and realized it would turn into a riot and just dropped the shit. As it turned out, the Asian probably saved my life.

The Drop of a Hat

We had an old school wood called KTP (Kill the Police) on 4 building on McConnell. He had KTP tattooed between his eyes and all kinds of weird tattoos all over his head and body. I saw him talking to a young Esse gang member when I returned from school one afternoon. My plan was to go inside and catch a nap because I was tired from being up since 4am. But then KTP and the Esse started fighting. KTP held his own until another Esse jumped in. What did they think I'd stand by and let that go down? I jumped in and beat the shit out of the dude who jumped in the one-on-one fight. I smashed him and he ran up by his cell on 2 row and slammed his door shut on the 'in.'

I went outside and let the other woods know what had happened. The Esse gang members convened on the other side of the yard. I went with another wood to speak with them. Their leader was irate, demanded to know why I got in family business? I explained my position. KTP said the dude owed him a dollar for a cigarette and the dude got hostile and took a swing at him. I said I was cool until they started clicking on the old man. I wouldn't tolerate that type of thing in front of me. The Esse who jumped in the fight was still in his cell. That made him look weak because you are supposed to catch the outside yard after anything like that and get the shit straight. Those Esse later hurt that dude bad for "catching pussy," but right then their leader had calmed down and said he understood why I jumped in and respected it. Their solution? Let them have the old man.

I shook my head in the negative. No way would I comply with throwing KTP to the dogs, especially when he was in the right. The woods backed me up and we split up, thinking a war would kick off. There was tension for several days. But the Esse gang leader had business with another wood and they ended up squashing everything.

Drugs and money sometimes supersede bullshit conflicts in here. The key is to give everyone an opportunity to save face.

The KTP incident, among many others, is why words like Cameron sung my praises. Cam said, “Damn, Young Pruett! Every time I look up you are busting someone’s head in! You’ll throw down the drop of a hat, huh?!”

Once, I was outside playing handball with a word named Critter. During our game a 6’-7” and well over 350 pound black dude ran right through our court. He was running laps around the yard. Running through the handball court while a game is on is blatant and obvious disrespect. I said, “Hey, dude! Can’t you see we’re playing a game?!”

He didn’t even respond, just kept on running.

I told Critter I was going to check him if he did it again. We both hoped he wouldn’t because he could probably beat up both of us at one time, but you don’t let anyone disrespect you in here. It opens the door for everything from robbery to rape.

As the big boy made his return lap I could tell he was about to cross through our court again. I snatched up the handball and power served it with my fist right into his mid-section. He cried out in anguish and ran right at me. I knew I didn’t stand a chance head on with him, so I ran around him, talked shit to him as I ducked and dodged all of his efforts, hoping to tire him out. Finally, after a few minutes, he stopped running and simply fast walked after me. “I’m gone get me some of dat purdy white booty when I catch you, white boy!”

I took a deep breath, knowing it was then or never as the fence line had crowded with observing prisoners, then I lunged at him and busted him right in the nose. I was fast and furious, making solid connections to his head, cutting him good with my knuckles, bobbing and weaving his punches. Then he landed a haymaker right above my eye and knocked me to the concrete. Dazed and bleeding. He said, “I drop you ho-ass white boys!”

Had he kicked me while I was down, beat on me some more, I would’ve been okay with it. But instead, he clowning me and truly disrespected me. I couldn’t let it go without retaliating. I ran to the trash can and snatched the metal lid off and took a swing at him. I hit his arm as he blocked his head, then he yanked the lid from me and was just about to hammer me when the rec yard filled with rank and officers.

I was locked up in 11 building in PHD: They later put me on medium custody, 7 building, but I caught up with the dude again and he apologized to me. He shook my hand and said he didn’t know what got into him that day and he hoped it was squashed.

In my book that made it over. He was merely testing me and he realized I wouldn’t accept it and might try to stab him, so he wanted to squash it. Fine by me. I didn’t want to stab anyone, but sometimes in prison you don’t have any other choice. The threat of being violent on that level deters some of the predators in here.

Like Father, Like Son

Violence is the order of the day in prison. Many of us were conditioned to respond aggressively to any perceived threat or disrespect. My father was a very violent man from decades of living that type of life. So much so that he carried it to the freeworld, reacted violently when he felt 'contested.' He had an edge about him that frightened me as a boy and I often wondered why he was so explosive and crazy? Then I came to prison and experienced this environment myself and I understood him a little better, what made him that way.

Sometime around the middle part of 1999 I had a startling revelation: I was becoming my father. Part of me was proud that I commanded a great deal of respect amongst the convicts, that most knew I'd not only fight when forced, but I was a force to be reckoned with. It had become instinctive almost for me to lash out at dudes who crossed my boundaries. Violation of my personal space was unacceptable and it unleashed the monster in me. That monster was the only thing the predators seemed to respect.

The moment I realized I was becoming my father, depression crept in. Don't get me wrong. I love my dad and always will. In my heart I know he wishes he could rewind the hands of time and do it right the next time. I know he gave us his best after he was released from Missouri in 1986. But he was a product of this violent environment: one mean sonofabitch. I didn't want to be that way; it brought tears just thinking about it, finally comprehending the inadvertent psychological conditioning that occurs in prison and its effect on me. Yet, to renounce violence in here is equivalent to losing all respect. Losing respect means to concede to the whims of the predators.

You're on Your Own, Kid

My hope vanished by the Summer of 1999. A slip from the mailroom informed me to go pick up my legal mail. The letter from my attorney stated that my direct appeal had been denied. My lawyer regretted to inform me that the state doesn't compensate attorney beyond direct appeals, and if I wanted to attack my conviction and sentence further I'd have to do it myself or hire counsel.

It was a long walk back to my cell.

What could I do? I couldn't afford a \$2 tube of toothpaste much less \$20,000 or more for appeal attorneys! I turned to the jailhouse lawyers, those that we call writ writers. The best deal I could get from them was \$2500 to file my State habeas corpus, but I had to buy my trial transcripts, an additional \$1,000

I came so close to knocking that old dude's teeth down his throat.

Glen Denney was likely the best writ writer I ever knew. He said, “Son, you might as well get used to prison because you ain’t ever getting outta here. Don’t take this the wrong way,” He chuckled. “But you’re poor white trash and nobody really gives a fuck out there in the freeworld if you killed that ol boy or your daddy did. You’re on your own, kid.”

With nowhere to turn and no real way to attack my conviction, I succumbed to a great state of despair. I walked around listlessly, with my head down, consumed by everything bad in my life. My mother rarely wrote anymore. She was struggling to make ends meet herself. She moved a lot back then, staying wherever anyone would let her and my niece Stephanie stay for a little to no money. I sent her many letters that she never even got because she had to suddenly move and forgot to send me her new address. I was lucky if she wrote twice a year.

I still wrote my father and brother regularly. At that point I was still upset with my father and our relationship was somewhat strained, but we wrote. My brother and I weren’t as close as we once were, but we kept up with each other. Other than them two, though, I wasn’t getting any incoming mail back then.

I’d met several prisoners on McConnell that I grew to love like brothers and they tried to lift my spirits when they noticed me transform from energetic and vibrant to laconic and languid. Nothing they could do or say seemed to pull me out of the darkness I was swirling into. I felt deflated because I couldn’t see any light at the end of my tunnel. I felt alone in the world, as if no one really cared if I lived or died.

After I left Skyview I was considered an ‘out-patient,’ meaning I was still on the psych caseload but out on a regular unit. I took anti-depressants and saw a psych lady named Ms Farris a couple times a month. Once my appeal was denied she had the doctor increase my medication and she pulled me out to talk weekly. I told her about my mom not being involved in my life anymore, how I was feeling and thinking. She asked, “Do you think it’s possible your mom doesn’t keep close contact because it hurts her so much? After all, she lost all of her boys at once. it must be painful for her.”

At the time I didn’t see it. In my mind she just didn’t care anymore and she had moved on with her life. Today, I know Ms Farris was on to something. People tend to ignore the things that most hurt them. I know my mother felt powerless to help us and our sentences overwhelmed her. Back in 1999, after my appeal was denied, I never stopped to think about how incredibly hard her life was then. If whatever she was going through did cross my mind, and it must have, it paled in comparison to what I was experiencing. So, I grew apathetic towards her and the rest of the world. Just as the state had thrown me away, I felt like my mom had abandoned me, and I was gripped by an all-encompassing sadness.

I soon began to feel and exhibit great enmity towards the world and became self-destructive. My world was shit and the greater part of me wanted it all to end. In Ms Menn’s class my friend James Belyue listened to me rant about how tragic life is and how I wished it all would come crashing down. When I san Aeinema by Tool, James got upset

with me. “Hey, Man! Just because your life sucks and you want to die, don’t wish the world to go down with you! I got two kids and a wife waiting for me at home, dude!”

All of my life, I have viewed injecting drugs as one of the worst things a person could do. I associated it with the lowest and most pathetic dope fiends and never once touched a needle while I was free. After my appeal was denied, while in that perpetually depressed state, I injected cocaine with my cellie. The rush was unlike anything I’ve ever felt, but it soon faded and left me wanting more. My cellie had \$500 worth of coke and I kept trying to get him to fix me up a shot that would OD me, but he said he didn’t need the police finding my dead body in his cell. He joked, but I was serious. We ran out of dope by sunrise and I slept the day away, missing work and everything else.

The wood scoring that coke was named Kevin. He had a mule, or person to bring it inside the prison. Around that time there was tension between the woods and an Esse family over the mule. The Esses claimed they had her first and Kevin needed to show some respect and back off. He was about to let them have her before I spoke up. “You gonna just let them meskins hog you? Next thing you know you’re gonna be sucking their dicks if you let them ho you out.”

The Kevin situation wasn’t any of my business. Kevin was in a white family and his brothers didn’t like the way I talked to him. But by then I would explode at the slightest provocation and I smiled as they dealt with me carefully, afraid to set me off. I had a death wish, I now know. I subconsciously wanted a race war, longed for riots with shanks and canned goods wrapped in socks, and it became increasingly obvious that most of the other woods didn’t want me around anymore because they were worried I’d get them all killed. When they voiced their thoughts about my behavior I reversed it on them and implied they were weak-minded, a slap away from being someone’s bitch, that more of the woods needed to incorporate my smash-first-and-talk-later mentality.

My hatred for the system grew exponentially. It burned me up inside that they, the judges, prosecutors and politicians, could do what they had done to kids like me. Every order from a guard or rule I had to obey grated on my nerves. When I was called out into the fields I felt like a slave, that they were rubbing salt into my wounds, making me pound on dirt in the blazing South Texas sun. Every time a guard told me to shave, tuck my shirt in, or gave me any other order, I felt like they were slapping me in the face. Prison life began to gnaw at my psyche, wore me down and made me abhor waking up each morning.

I was dying inside.

Return to the Field

Administrative Segregation – Bottom of the Barrel

December of 1999 – April of 2002

The moment I was considered a suspect in the death of officer Nagle they put me in jail. That's what we call it in here when they lock you up in administrative segregation, 'going to jail.' In general population and on minimum custody, which was my custody status in December of 1999, you're given limited freedom of movement within the prison. You're allowed to walk to the chow halls, the laundry, library, recreation yards and dayrooms. Prisoners operate the farms, working the kitchens, laundry, production factories, field squads, clean-up crews and office clerk jobs. You are responsible for showing up to work on time, as well as 'lay-ins'; or appointments, to medical, school, or classification committees. It's like being in a small city, a closed community that functions similarly to any other in society. Just as those who break the law are arrested in the free world, so it is that you go to jail in administrative segregation when you violate the rules in prison.

The TDCJ has the most oppressive behavioral modification system of any prison system in the country. In GP you are classified a custody status – minimum, medium and close – according to your conduct. The same goes for ad seg, except the living conditions in seg are drastically worse. In ad seg you're caged in a cell for 23 hours per day, and all physical contact is prohibited. Everything you're entitled to, from food to law library books, is brought to you and given through a tray slot, or small hole in your cell door. Before you exit your cell or a 'staging area', such as the recreation rooms and showers, you must place your hands behind your back and out the tray slot to be handcuffed, then two guards armed with riot batons escort you wherever you're headed. There aren't any televisions, you do not work, visitation is held in another cage with bulletproof glass separating visitor from prisoner, and you recreate alone. When they first place you in seg you are on level 3 – the bottom of the barrel – and have virtually no property. You get 3 hours of rec per week, 1 visit per month and only hygiene and stamp purchases from the commissary. The idea is to subject rule violators to extreme sensory deprivation and

gradually reward their good behavior by upgrading their level status. With each step you get a little more property, recreation, visit time and other minor privileges until you make level 1. The average stay in ad seg is about 5 years if you play by the rules, but for many prisoners there's zero hope of ever being reintegrated back into the general population.

When Nagle died it had been 17 years since the last TDCJ guard was murdered on duty. Being the prime suspect, I was Enemy # 1 in the system and given High Profile status. They sent me to Michael unit. It's the prototype farm for units like McConnell, Connally and Polunsky, and even though it was built in 1986 it was already falling apart. The wardens and majors greeted me off the prisoner van and walked me to my new house on 11 building; a video camera focused on me every step of the way. For the next two years a video camera was required to be rolling anytime I was pulled out of my cell or my tray slot was opened for any reason. The big wigs in Huntsville wanted all of my movements documented just in case some angry guard decided to retaliate. The administration was protecting themselves against a potential lawsuit, as guards have a propensity for administering their own ideas of justice.

The camera didn't stop them from trying to make my life hell on Michael unit. I was isolated in 11 building with PHD (pre-hearing detention), solitary and transit inmates in temporary seg. For the first few months guards on both shifts randomly appeared at my door to curse and threaten me. My window faced a sidewalk and they frequently beat on it as they passed, waking me up at all hours. The camera was supposed to be on when I got my meals, to make sure I was fed, but some of them would spit in my food before they turned the camera on and handed me my tray. As a level 3 I didn't have much property, but what I did have, like personal photos, letters and books, I often found strewn all over my floor when I returned from rec or shower.

These and many other psychological games were played on me to break my spirit, crush my will to live. Little did they know, I already felt dead inside, so their tactics had almost no effect. After a few months of staring blankly at them, walking around my cell naked (my own little mind game for the shy ones), and eating their spit, they seemed to catch on: I just didn't give a fuck.

Most of my peace and quiet time on Michael was spent reading novels. I had about 15 books that I read in no time, then I borrowed books from the dudes down the run. To pass stuff I made a 'fishing line' out of unraveled boxer shorts and a long 'fishing pole' out of tightly rolled up magazines, then we'd "fish" under the small cracks of the doors. They say necessity is the mother of invention, and that's readily apparent in ad seg. The degree of creativity and ingenuity you see in seg is incredibly impressive. Dudes make speakers, homemade wine, multi-outlet plugs, and many other crafts out of virtually little material. An old warden once said, "You put 3 convicts at the top of telephone poles over shark-infested waters, give one a sack of dope, one rolling papers and another a lighter and I guarantee you all three will be high in an hour."

Reading kept my mind off of my hopeless predicament for the most part, but dark thoughts often swarmed my head. I'd written my family and told them I was a murder suspect, but almost two months later I still hadn't gotten any mail. My dad and brother wrote back immediately, but the TDCJ was holding my mail, unbeknownst to me, and I just felt unloved and lonely. Besides, my mom hadn't written since the previous summer, and I wouldn't hear from her until April of 2000. An emptiness engulfed me and thoughts of suicide seemed more and more inviting. A really sweet psych lady showed up at my door one day and asked me how I felt. I told her I was tired of living and she replied, "But you're so young and intelligent, Robert. Don't give up on life when you have so much left."

She had no idea who I was, what I'd been through or what I was facing. Once I told her my story she feebly said, "Oh my... oh my..."

The Rams were playing the Titans in the Super Bowl. Shorty, an ex-Mexican Mafia gang member, lived across the run from me and he gave me updates on the game. By halftime I cut out my light and fell asleep. Cheering and clapping woke me up. As I lay there in the dark I could see and hear Shorty through the screen of my door. Suddenly, a dense, black cloud appeared above the foot of my bunk. I was paralyzed by the most extreme fear of my life; all I could move were my eyes as its shape shifted. A menacing face formed as I watched it with horror. It finally slammed into me, breaking the paralysis.

I have no recollection of ever opening my eyes or waking up after I absorbed the presence. I heard Shorty talking to someone down the run and he was still at his door when I jumped out of bed gasping for air. Sweat poured down my body and I shook violently. I went to the sink to wash my face with cold water. Could it have been a dream? Why didn't I 'wake up'? Never before or since have I been so terrified, and it just felt so real.

In March of 2000 I was transported to Beeville and went before the judge for the first time. I also met my attorneys for the first time. I was indicted on charges of capital murder and my lawyers brought me up to speed on the case the prosecutors were building against me. I pleaded not guilty, then got to speak privately with my lawyers for about 3 hours. I told them everything I knew, without implicating anyone else, and then told them I was seriously contemplating changing my plea to guilty and asking for the death penalty. They were shocked. John Gilmore, my lead counsel, was animated and near tears when he spoke to me. "Robert, I can't tell you what to do. I can only advise. Your story breaks my heart, man. You were screwed by the system. Please, let me help you?" John Gilmore is a good man. I felt the sincerity in every word he spoke, so I conceded. After our talk he asked the judge to have me moved closer to his Corpus Christi office so he and Joe Collina, my other lawyer, could visit with me and discuss trial strategy. In June of 2000 I was moved back to the Connally unit, this time as an ad seg prisoner.

On Connally I was again housed on 11 building, but this time they put me upstairs in a solitary cell around other ad seg level 2 'overflow' prisoners. 12 building was filled to

capacity. Even though I was still the most hated inmate in the system, the seg guards on Connally weren't nearly as hostile towards me as those from Michaels. Well, at least not most of the time.

My quality of life slightly improved on Connally. I knew a lot of the dudes out in GP and they had coffee and stamps smuggled to me, plus many words of encouragement. My window faced the population chow halls so I could watch my old buddies coming and going each meal. Rusty sent word that I should let him know if I needed anything. I was due to make level 1 in a few months and I didn't have a radio in my property, so I asked if he could help. In the 10 months between being segged and finally making level 1, I went through terrible music withdrawals! I sang to myself often and engaged in games of 'name that tune' with my neighbors, but I was desperate for some tunes. Rusty made sure I had a radio by the time I made level 1, which I was totally grateful for.

The summer of 2000 broke records for extreme temperatures. Rumor came down that dudes in GP, where there's no air conditioner, were falling out left and right, and several had died from heat exhaustion on chain buses. That year the South Texas temps were regularly over 100 degrees. With the humidity the heat index was closer to 115 degrees daily. Living on 11 building felt like being in an oven. There wasn't any air-conditioning, and as level 2's we weren't allowed fans. The ventilation system only pushed in the hot air from outside. Imagine the blazing sun heating up those metal ducts on the roof all day, not to mention the concrete walls, and not being able to open your window! We had to plug the vents up or we would've died from heat exhaustion. I used to block off my window with my jumpsuit, lean my mattress against the wall to block the heat radiating from it (those walls would get so hot you couldn't keep your hand on them for more than a few seconds!), place all my property on the bunk, then flood the floor with toilet water. I'd lay naked on the floor to cool off, but it was so hot that the water would evaporate in a couple hours tops and I had to flood again. My mattress absorbed so much heat that I couldn't sleep on it the entire summer. The floor would finally start to cool off around 4am, and most of us slept from then until about 10am. As far as living conditions go, the summer of 2000 was by far the worst and most miserable of all my time in prison.

The level 2's around me were being rotated back to 12 building, the only air-conditioned buildings in all of TDCJ, every 30-45 days, but I was stuck on 11 building until late September. I'd made level 1 and, at first, they just moved me downstairs into a PHD cell with an electrical outlet for my appliances. The solitary cells didn't have them. Then, I complained to the major about the library refusing to bring me book orders, which as a level 1 I was entitled to. They had a policy, though, that no library orders were filled for 11 building. The major moved me over to 12 building, A-pod-1 cell, and I just didn't know how to act in the air conditioning!

Being in seg, where I didn't have to work and everything was brought to me, afforded me the opportunity to sleep whenever I wanted, read to my heart's desire, and

contemplate life's imponderables. As I alluded to in the previous chapters, my faith in Christianity faltered on McConnell unit. In seg, I reread the bible in hopes of restoring my faith, rediscovering a purpose in life, but it didn't inspire me the way it once did. In fact, I noticed many discrepancies that I'd missed before. The story just didn't add up to me. I shared my thoughts with chaplains and the convict Christians around me, yet no one could help me make sense of the doctrine. My questioning mind was a threat to them and they tried to discourage me.

In search of answers to my deeper questions, I delved into other religious texts such as the Koran, Odinism, Greek philosophy, Eastern philosophy, history and whatever I could get my hands on related to spirituality and mankind. I read Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species,' which made me think of the *élan vital*, the mysterious life force that propels all life. Friedrich Nietzsche taught me about the relativity of morals in "The Genealogy of Morals," how each culture believes their ways are the right and true ways. I ruminated over everything I read, but the spirit eluded me until I finally concluded that if there is a Supreme Being, a deeper purpose or meaning to existence, it's impossible to know it. Agnosticism best fit how I reasoned, so I abandoned pursuit of the spirit.

The issue of race preoccupied me in segregation. Several of the peckerwoods on Connally funneled racial literature (propaganda) to me and I immersed myself in it. I read Hitler's "Mein Kampf," and David Duke's "My Awakening," which broke down race issues in America, crime statistics by race, and the physiological and psychological (cultural) differences in the races. White racial literature like "The Turner Diaries," "Might is Right," and pamphlets by organizations like the NAAWP (National Association for the Advancement of White People) colored my views on race (pun intended) and fueled the fire of my hate. I reflected on my experiences from population, where blacks and other races exploit, rape and rob weak whites. I observed the behavior of the various races around me. The black revolutionary and militant prisoners spewed their venom for the white race, calling white people "devils" and the source of all their problems. For them, violence was the only solution to the white problem. One black dude in particular used to cell warrior with every white dude he saw, screaming threats and expressing his deep-rooted hate, which I ignorantly thought was a reflection of most black people's views.

Although I wasn't so stupid as to believe all of any race is bad, I developed deep racial views while in seg. It burned me up that I was blamed for all of black people's problems, especially considering I grew up in worse conditions than many of them did. I was against racial mixing and procreating because my mind had been poisoned to think it "diluted" the "pure white genepool." I believed that there was a Jewish conspiracy to propagate egalitarian politics so they could kill off the white race.

I didn't realize it back then, but all of my anger and hate regarding race was misdirected and ignorant. I was so pissed off at the system for throwing me away that I needed somewhere to focus my negative energy. As the years passed I opened my eyes and

matured, slowly growing out of that convoluted ideology on race. Today, I realize that there is no pure race; we all share DNA and we all sprang from the same source. But even if there was a pure white race I wouldn't be a proponent of eugenics or separatism. While I do acknowledge small physiological and larger cultural differences amongst the races, I don't think any race is better than the other. I treat everyone the same when I first meet them; I don't stereotype people based on race or anything else, but rather I give people an equal chance to show me who they are as individuals. I understand that more often than not socioeconomic factors play the largest role in how people are treated. The rich and famous have it made; while the poor outcasts from both the ghetto and trailer park have it rough.

My hope is that as society evolves, we'll erase the things that separate and divide us such as race and class that we'll grow together as a consciousness to greater heights.

I'll never forget what Flash, the wood who did most of my tattoos, once said to me. We were on the yard and I went on a tangent about how black people in prison prey on weak whites and how the woods needed to start unifying. I said something rather insensitive and ignorant. Flash pulled me to the side and, where only I could hear, said, "Young Pruett, one day you're going to grow out of that bullshit. Don't believe everything these "superwoods" tell you.... Use your head, man."

Flash knew a thing or two about a thing or two.

Blind Justice

Judge Joel Johnson presided over my case and he knew I wouldn't get a fair trial in Beeville, a community of prison guards, so he changed the venue of the trial to Corpus Christi. In January of 2002 I was moved to the Nueces County jail in Corpus Christi. They placed me in Super Max, another single man cell similar to ad seg except there I had a shower in my cell and access to pay phone.

From the beginning the odds were stacked against me at trial. There I was, poor white trash covered in tattoos, already serving a 99 year sentence for a murder conviction. Now here comes these good old boys in their fancy suits representing "the people of the state of Texas." To be qualified as a juror in a capital case you're not only required to be for the death penalty, you must promise to consider the defendant innocent from the very beginning. The prosecutors have to prove the defendant guilty to you 'beyond a reasonable doubt.' The job of the qualified capital murder case juror is to weigh only the evidence presented across the witness stand; nothing more, nothing less. Yet, how many of those 12 jurors looked over at me that very first day as the indictment was read and considered me innocent? How many were immediately won over by the charismatic prosecutors who spoke like your buddy down at the bar when they said, "We just want

justice in this case?” Throughout the course of the trial the judge asks the jury to leave the room for fear of them hearing or seeing something inadmissible. Each time they left the room in my case they had impatient looks on their faces that asked, “What’s this murderer trying to hide from us on a technicality?” I think most jurors find criminal defendants guilty even when the evidence doesn’t support a guilty verdict because they don’t believe the good old boys from the state would drag everyone down to the courthouse and waste all the hard-earned taxpayer’s money if they didn’t KNOW the defendant was guilty. Rather than presuming a defendant innocent and forcing the prosecution to prove their case, many jurors want the defense to prove the defendant is innocent. The way the system works, from my vantage point, is not ‘innocent until proven guilty,’ it’s ‘guilty until proven innocent.’

Texas Death Row – A welcomed Release

April 30, 2002 - Present

When I first arrived on the row I was 22 years old and internally defeated. My neighbors said that the average stay on the row before execution was about 6 1/2 years, but given the nature of my case I figured I’d be dead much sooner. I certainly didn’t expect to see 30. This didn’t bother me in the least; death seemed to offer a welcomed release from a life of great adversity and pain.

Death row is housed on 12 building, the ad seg building, on Polunsky, and operates under the rules and guidelines of the Administrative Segregation Plan. The first thing I noticed when I walked onto A-pod and into 23 cell at 11:30pm that first night was the utter silence. A stark contrast to the 24/7 noise pollution on an ad seg pod. Dudes in seg like to bang on their doors and beat out rap songs on their tables and bunks; they get their entertainment “cell warrioring” (screaming threats and curses at each other behind the safety of their cell doors), playing kid games, flooding the runs, lighting fires and seemingly competing to see who can be the most raucous idiot. They have very little sensory stimulation, and many have zero hope of ever returning to population where they’d be forced to account for their disrespectful behavior, so they behave with a blatant disregard for each other. Dudes in seg create drama because they are bored. They also like to chunk spears and bodily fluids at each other and the guards. It’s a hostile and annoying environment. So, it was a culture shock the day I landed on the row.

The night I pulled up, my neighbors pitched in and sent me a care package: toothpaste, tooth brush, soap, deodorant, shower slides, coffee, writing supplies, stamps and some food to snack on. It’s a ritual here and one that I observe when new arrivals show up, regardless of what they’re here for. You don’t have anything when you show up for at

least a month as you wait on them to issue you a commissary/ID card, and dudes generally try to help each other here. There's very little of the racial tension and division on death row that I experienced in GP. Here, you see dudes of all races eating together, making birthday cards for each other, and just supporting and encouraging one another in a variety of ways. Sure, it might get loud at times during the day or on an NFL Sunday (especially if the Texans or Cowboys are playing!), but it's usually quiet once the lights go out around 10pm as guys get wrapped up in their letters, books, music and various projects. And while there have been instances of violence towards each other and the guards, it's nowhere near as frequent as in ad seg. I once heard death row inmates described as "one happy family."

In fact, the differences between ad seg and death row are so great that the guards who work 12 building, were 2 of 4 pods house ad seg inmates, all say they hate working ad seg pods. They love working a death row pod because the ambience is laid back and relaxed....most of the time.

My analysis of this phenomenon is simple: The men on death row are faced with their mortality, unavoidably aware that their time on Earth is limited as appeals are denied and the people around them are killed with alarming regularity. Many are remorseful for their crimes and the lifestyles that led them here. They retreat within themselves and search for the peace of the spirit. Some feel like they've caused enough hurt in the world and they just don't want to perpetuate the vicious cycles of hate and violence. Many here prefer to use their time to research their cases and fight for their lives, exercise their minds and bodies, and search their souls for eternal truths. We do feud with each other sometimes, something that's inevitable when you live and die together for years, but as Jeff "Rabbit" Prible says, "We're all on a sinking ship like the Titanic; they're killing us wholesale. It makes no sense to bust more holes in the ship and fight amongst ourselves."

We All Need Love

Humans are social creatures. Everyone needs someone to talk to, who they can relate to, who empathize with, loves and supports them. Many dudes who end up in prison have families that stick by them at first; they write letters regularly, put money on their commissary accounts and even visit. Most of the time this support diminishes as the years pass until, eventually, it stops completely. People in the free world simply go on with their lives and forget about us in here. It's rare for a dude in prison to have continued love and support from a family member for any extended period of time.

As for my father, brother and I, well, we never had much support from our family since we were arrested in 1995. Cousin Chris, Lema's oldest daughter, has written an occasional letter and card, and Dewey has helped out from time to time, but the rest of

them abandoned us. In fact, Chris is the only family member, aside from my father and brother, to testify on my behalf at the punishment phase of my capital murder trial in 2002. Our family is filled with outlaws, many of whom have been in and out of prison multiple times since 1995, and over the years they have become a distant memory to us.

My mother struggled mightily after we were all snatched away from her in the wake of Ray's death. She stayed with Junior's bunch in Beaumont for a little while until they ran her off, then she lived with Dewey for a few months. He kicked her out onto the streets and she was forced into the George Foreman shelter in Houston, along with my sister and her infant daughter Stephanie. Throughout her entire life, my mother has depended on others to help her, and to this day she wouldn't be able to survive without government assistance.

Mom has never been much of a writer, but she did try to keep up with us via letter for the first year or so. I'm not sure if it's because she just has a hard time expressing herself or if it's just too hard for her to think about us being here, but her letters have come few and far between over the years. She does try to get over for a visit when the opportunity arises, but she's disabled and can't drive so she needs someone with a vehicle to bring her. In recent years I've been fortunate to be able to see her and my niece Stephanie a couple of times a year, on average, but it's not unusual for years to pass without a visit from her. As a consequence of this infrequent communication, our relationship has struggled. There's no anger or animosity between us; it just feels like we don't really know each other anymore. Don't get me wrong. I still love her like always, and she loves me unconditionally. I know better than anyone that my mother tried her very best to do right by me; she just had no idea how to control me, and I was too stubborn to listen to her when she tried. And it wasn't easy for her when her boys were snatched out of her life all at once, leaving her alone in the world to fend for herself, so I haven't held it against her for not keeping close contact with me throughout my incarceration. I can't imagine what it's like to walk in her shoes. No matter what, I know she loves me and prays for me to come home... I love you with all of my heart and soul, Momma, and nothing will ever change that.

My brother and I have stayed in close contact from the very beginning. I'd say we write each other about twice a month, depending on our moods. Steven was 25 years old when he came in and he's in his forties now. He's come a long way in that time. Unlike me, he's never been a trouble maker. He had his moment when he got involved with a prison gang and that costed him a few years of his life in ad seg, but for the most part he has tried to educate and prepare himself for his first parole hearing in 2015. I'm proud to say that he finally got his G.E.D, he's learned the plumbing trade and has become head plumber in his unit. He continues to learn and grow in hopes of regaining his freedom someday. We've had our ups and downs over the years, like all brothers do, but our love is as strong as when we were kids and struggling to each night. It's one of my greatest hopes to see

him walk out of here, have his own family and enjoy the rest of his life on the streets. He's not a criminal, never was, and I have no doubt that he can hold a job and be a productive member of society.....Brotherham, blood is thicker than water, and I will always hold you near and dear to my heart.

As with my brother, my father and I have maintained steady contact over the years. His first few years in gp were spent on the Allred unit and he didn't get into much trouble at all; just a few fist fights, but I don't think any of them led to disciplinary action. He was placed in ad seg a couple months after I was because he wrote a letter to my brother that the TDCJ construed as threatening to their staff. About five years later he was confirmed a gang member and ended up spending about 12 years in ad seg before going through the GRAD program (The GRAD is for ex-gang members. It takes 9 months to complete after you renounce your membership from your gang) and being released to the general population this year.

As I've said, I've completely forgiven my father. I don't hold any negative energy towards him. First of all, life is too short to hold grudges and be weighed down by hate. Secondly, I know for a fact that my father continues to live in regret and guilt for how he handled the situation with Ray, not to mention the many mistakes he made raising me. He sometimes writes these very long letters to me, beating himself up, telling me how much he hates himself, how terrible a father he was, and how he wishes he could erase it all. He'd gladly switch places with me, and it's his greatest hope that I'll get off the row and my brother and I will be free again someday. I still love my father with all of my heart. He did try to do the right thing and work for a living after he was released from Missouri in 1986, but he wasn't able to free himself from his own anger issues and it costed all of us our lives. Of course, I know I didn't help much, and I know it was my behavior that led to it all. The point is, my father was a product of his environment, as we all are, and some of us weren't strong enough to overcome and rise above all the negative influences that shape us. Randy Pausch (The Last Lecture) said that we can't choose the hands we are dealt, but we can choose how to play them. For the most part, my father and I both played our hands in the worst possible ways. But, in my opinion, it's not the mistakes and bad choices we make in life that defines us, but rather it's whether or not we have learned from them and have become better people as a result... Pops, I know life hasn't been kind to any of us, but I hope you know that I know where your heart's at and that I love you and always will.

While I was in the county jail in Corpus my lawyer John Gilmore put some money on my commissary account. I rarely got money while in GP. I had to hustle for everything. I saved most of what John sent me for when I got to death row so I could buy the basic necessities. It turned out that the TDCJ threw away all of my property while I was going to trial, so I was without a radio, hot pot, fan, all of my books, and, saddest of all,

irreplaceable family photos. With John's money I was able to get most of this, but I braced myself for what I thought would be a hard road ahead.

I've been fortunate to meet, befriend and love many people from all over the world since I got to death row. It has been interesting learning about all of these folks, their cultures and sharing life's experiences with them, along with some very deep dialogues on philosophy, religion, politics, science and the mysteries of existence. They helped open my mind to a world that I didn't know could exist inside of these walls, allowing me to be a part of their lives and live vicariously through them, showing me a side of humanity I'd long lost faith in. The vast majority of these people eventually faded out of my life, for one reason or another, but I'll always treasure the awesome memories and experiences we shared.

About a month after I got here I received a letter from Ines in Switzerland. She extended her hand in friendship and invited me into her family. She offered me the love and support that had been missing in my life. I was blown away by her compassion, genuine kindness and empathy. She's a huge opponent of the death penalty and a formidable instrument in the fight against it. She accepted me for who I was without judgment because she loves people and wanted to help someone in my situation. At probably the lowest point in my life Ines appeared with open arms and she has stuck by me ever since. And I assure you it hasn't been easy on her, riding the roller coaster of my life, yet she has an indefatigable spirit and has shown remarkable patience, loyalty and love for me from the very start.

A few others have come along in recent years and showered me with love and support. Tony is a chemistry teacher from England and has been a brother to me. Like Ines, he welcomed me as one of his own family. Over the past five years we've had a blast delving into science, politics, and history together. The man has an extensive and impressive knowledge and is totally cool to hang out with. We share a strong camaraderie and he's always been there for me when I needed him most. Someday, we'll get to relax in his favorite pub and laugh about all of this over a few drinks....

Heather in Australia started as my father's penfriend, as he met her through Ines, but over the years she has written my brother and I as well. Recently, she has been an amazing friend to me, tirelessly writing detailed letters to politicians, lawyers and organizations the world over on my behalf, fanning the flames of my hope of freedom somebody, and reminding me that altruism does exist amongst humans....

There's Theresa in Germany who shares my love of reading. Her love for kids is exhibited by the wonderful children's books she's written. Her repugnance for the U.S. justice system and its flaws echoes the sentiments of many Europeans and inspires hope that the U.S. will someday abolish the death penalty. I've thoroughly enjoyed discussing literature, politics and life with her....

Niki in Dallas is an anomaly in this state: she's adamantly against the death penalty and a strong advocate for its abolishment as well as justice reform. Over the past couple of years she has been a constant in my life, writing and visiting regularly, helping my mother and niece get down for visits, befriending my father and brother, and just being someone I can count on. She was shocked and indignant upon hearing my story, and ever since she's been an unrelenting force in the fight for my life. It's because of her determination and persistence that David Dow's group at the University of Houston recently took my case. She has become one of my best friends in life....

Amy in California has been a dominant and compelling force in my life the past couple of years. She's a free spirit with the awe-inspiring love and compassion of a Bodhisattva. From the very beginning she has touched my heart with her connections to nature, the universe, people and life. Her poetic and philosophical musing resonate within my soul and have helped awaken my own muse. She's the type of person that you can't know and not love. In so many ways she has taught me about what it means to love and live in the moment. She exudes an energy and light that has often left me breathless...

Before I arrived on the row I struggled in many ways. Part of it was feeling so alone and unloved in the world. The above mentioned people, as well as the others who have come and gone, and even the new ones appearing, have allowed their collective light to shine into my otherwise dark world. It's astounding what a simple letter or card from someone who cares can do to soothe a melancholic soul. The love, compassion, empathy and kindness I've received since I got here has helped me change my attitude towards life, encouraged me to fight for life and inspired great hope.

I love you all from the bottom of my heart.

Living to Die

It took years to awaken from my depressed slumber. At first all I cared about doing was reading, following sports religiously, playing games like chess and basketball, and distracting myself with mindless activities. I felt sorry for myself for so many opportunities I missed. I was simply existing, and more than once I contemplated dropping my appeals and being done with it all. At some point, I decided I would just play it out, try to enjoy my experiences as best as I could until they killed me. It was nice having Ines and the others in my life, being able to make commissary and eat better than the slop they serve, not worrying about my coffee supply running out, and the letters and visits were pretty badass. Yet, I never tried to fight for my life those early years. I was merely living to die.

I met Lee "Tiny" Taylor in 2003. We shared parallel lives. He was nine months older than me and had grown up on the east side of Houston and in Channelview living a life

similarly to my own, although we never got to know each other out there in the free world. We shared many interests from books, music, sports, the love of the outdoors, and even women and enemies in life. His views, back then, mirrored my own. He was also certified as an adult at age 16, a few months after I was, and he'd been thrust into the same violent world of prison with a life sentence. Tiny killed a black inmate, a gang member, during a riot on the Telford unit in 1997 that pitted 14 Bloods against two peckerwoods. It was a total case of self-defense as Tiny simply did what any young wood is taught to do within these walls when threatened: fight for your honor at all costs.

Not long after we met, Tiny and I went down to level 3 together to protest the living conditions here on the row. We were extremely violent, lashing out at the guards, making it clear that we weren't to be treated like the lambs of the row. Major Nelson ran the building at the time and she asked, "Just what in the hell is you boys problem?" We wanted to be left alone. Period. Move us next to each other, let us live as best as we can until we die, and just leave us the fuck alone. In exchange for that simple request we promised to stop hurting the guards. She agreed.

During our rebellious phase Tiny and I built a bond and rapport that was unshakeable. He incorporated my live-until-they-kill-me attitude, and over the years we truly exemplified just that. Some of the greatest times of my entire life were spent right here on the row hanging out with Tiny, Jeff Prible, Bob Dylan, Richard "Psycho" Cobb, Boxcar, Pennywise, Bandit, Ghost and Third on A-pod, C-section. We practically lived together as we stayed hooked up on the "mics" 24/7 (we discovered how to talk to each other through our radios on the "mics"). We listened to sports and music together, shared our deepest thoughts, darkest fears and all of the good and bad times of our lives. We played games like Risk, Monopoly, chess, checkers, trivia, hang-man and derivatives of them all. We went on mental excursions together, turning out our lights and closing our eyes as we went out hunting, fishing, skateboarding, swimming, fighting in wars, and even heading out to the club to meet chicks. We invented a game called Death Row Idol in which we competed with songs, poetry, jokes, skits, and stories, then we all casted our votes to see who'd be voted off of the gurney. We laughed and cried together, sharing intimate memories, regrets, hopes and dreams. I grew to love those guys like brothers.

Sadly, only Jeff fought his conviction. The rest of us had no hope of surviving this experience, so we just tried to enjoy our moments together until that fateful day arrives.

After Major Nelson made warden and was transferred to another unit we were all split up. By then Tiny and I, among others, had grown up a little and calmed down considerably. We decided not to fight to stay together, but we still found ways at various times to get moved on the same pods together. It was good to move around the building, though, and meet new people. We used to say that we were tired of befriending people only to watch them be murdered and torn away from us, so we didn't try to make new friends. But I later realized that we were just living in fear. We were denying ourselves

the chance to know and love people. The truth is that I've met so many great dudes here, people like myself who didn't have much of a shot at life, and I've grown to love them and enjoy every moment I get with them. I don't worry about the future anymore. You see, everyone alive will someday die. It's unavoidable. But what I've come to learn is that while everyone dies, not everyone alive truly LIVES: And these days I'm in the business of living.

Since A-pod, C-section and my new attitude on life and living, I've been fortunate to know and love many people here. Allow me to try to capture the essence of all of them....

Bob Dylan was also a brother to Tiny. He made us laugh with his witticism, coining terms like "reflected," and the dude could build anything with his hands...

Boxcar bared his scars for all of us to examine, encouraging many to do the same, and even though he's older than most of us we protected him like our little brother....

Psycho was and still is a rebel soul, reminiscent of my own youth, and he makes you want to hug him with his stance on love and attachment to others. It's not just a biochemical and evolutionary process, dude.... ;-)

Bandit invented the mic system. It was his sound-effects and voices that helped color our journeys into our minds...

Ghost was probably 125-150 pounds lighter than Tiny, nowhere near as ferocious, but he really believed he could pin Tiny. The Ghost stories still make me laugh...

Pennywise was sometimes hard to understand, but he is so much fun to hang out with and he does have love and loyalty to his friends....

Crazy J grew up an orphan, like Psycho, and lived through some extremely traumatic experiences that no child should, yet he has overcome so much in life. His sharp wit and awesome sense of humor, not to mention his love and loyalty to his friends, makes him one of my favorite people to hang out with. His love for his daughter is something to behold...

Kevin also showed me great loyalty, sticking his neck out there when very few would've. Along with Psycho, Kevin was there with me through some of the most intense and exciting times here on the row. We rose above this place and dared to live an existence that few would risk. I can still hear his Yankee accent and his laugh....

Big Will was also certified as an adult out of Houston at age 16, but he was about five years older than Tiny and me. Still, I relate to him in ways that few here understand because he was also a white teenager when thrown into the lion's den. He takes life in stride, loves to laugh and raise the spirits of those around him, and if he's your friend then you have a true friend to the end. Has anyone been able to top his Cartman from South Park imitation? I think not....

Lil Chucky, we all love you, man! His recital of the song "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails expressed his own hurt and still echoes....

Rick and I have been through some shit together, but made it through it all. He taught me that actions speak louder than words, while showing me a lot of love and loyalty, not to mention understanding...

BD is our resident Viking and Warlock, and he's also proven his love and loyalty time and again....

Mark Robertson might just be the smartest dude I've ever met, and I've learned so much from him, including the aphorism, "If they'll do it with you, they'll do it to you..."

There are many others that have left lasting impressions on me, people such as Pablo, Fat Joe, Big Foot, Randy, Gus, Rob "Dead" Will, Lil Will, Jedi, and even the new guy, Buckshot, who will win at NASCAR someday, I'm sure..... Unfortunately, the order of the day here is death. The state has relentlessly snatched away so many. Tiny was killed on June 16, 2011... they got Kevin and Billy in May 2010... Woody seemed happy to go in September of 2007... Budders also high-stepped it outta here in September of 2011... Wolf reminded me that "as long as there's life there's hope" before he was taken in May of 2005 with Chi-Town... A few months before they killed Mark Stroman, who got here around the same time I did, he told me they'd killed over 200 people since we drove up. Images of these dudes and countless others flash through my mind at times; I can hear them laughing, remember things they did and said, and more often than not it just seems senseless that the state killed them.

The thing is, they aren't killing the same people who committed the crimes. It takes years for the appeals to run their course and in that time people change. Sure, some are just dangerous as the day they arrived, and I'm not saying everyone's some kind of angel, but so many have grown and matured in here and found their true Self. Many have realized the errors of their ways and would be productive members of society if they were given the chance. Even with a life in prison, these guys had much to offer humanity, not to mention the loved ones left with the scars of their murders.

Those we leave behind are the real victims of the death penalty; the dead rest in eternal peace.

It wasn't until about 2006 that I began to wake up and start fighting for my life. The people who loved me in the free world helped inspire me to fight. I reasoned that if they cared enough to help me, why shouldn't I do all that I can? If they believe in me, why shouldn't I believe in me?

One of my best friends in life is Ronald Jeffery "Rabbit" Prible, and he believes in me. Jeff never bought into mine and Tiny's live-until-they-kill-me mentality. While we all partied 24/7, Jeff would break away from the mics and work on his case every single day. I truly believe the guy is innocent, and he has never given up hope of being reunited with his family and kids one day. Jeff is similar to Amy in many ways, particularly his genuine love and compassion for all people. Even if you're someone who means harm to him, Jeff loves you and will give you the shirt off his back. He's a natural comedian, would rather

laugh than cry, and he's loyal to his core. He often says I'm the brother he never had, that he loves me no different than I came out of his mother's womb. He used to beg us all to knock off the bullshit and fight for our lives before it was too late. He enjoyed hanging out and having a good time as much as we did, but there was nothing more important to him than returning home to his kids and he would not and will not give up until that day arrives. His passion and determination helped light my own fire.

What the state is doing here is completely wrong. Not only is the system flawed and more than a few innocent are killed, but it's a stain against humanity when society kills in the name of justice. How do you teach someone it's wrong to kill by killing? The death penalty is about vengeance, hate, and ultimately, fear. Hopefully one day the death penalty will be abolished. Until that day arrives all of us who are horrified and outraged by the primitive and barbaric killings here should stand up against it. No longer will I sit around complacently waiting to die....

Tat Tvam Asi!

Years ago I was asked, "What would you change about the world if you had the power?" At first glance, there are countless answers to that question, and most of the answers would likely be met with nods of agreement. Things like poverty, war, suffering, disease and all of the negativity seems to be a part of most people's laundry list of things the world would be better off without. When I first contemplated the question, I, of course, thought of these universal problems, but also of the grave injustices that I've faced; how horrible the system was in handling me. I've often wished it all away, that I could've been born into a better environment, with more opportunity, and somehow could've avoided the life I've lived. Somehow, most of us think that the world is imperfect, that if we were in control and had created the universe it would be a better place to live.

Put a gun to my head right this instant and ask me what I'd change about the world if I could and I'd stare you right in the eye with complete equanimity and say, "Nothing at all."

All me to elucidate. I think everything is happening for a reason(s), even if it isn't readily apparent to us. The world as we know it is comprised of opposites. Whatever you can imagine, there's an opposite to it. Male/female, left/right, hot/cold, particle/antiparticle, positive/negative, and light/darkness. We think that if we could rid the world of all the negative energy that it would be a better place, but think about that for a second. How do we ever truly learn something without the pain and struggle that comes with it? We are strengthened by adversity. If something doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. You rip up your muscle tissues with exercise to grow stronger, physically and mentally. In my experiences many of the mentally toughest people I've encountered

have grown up and lived in the worst of circumstances. Ghettos, barrios and trailer parks. A perfect example of this aphorism would be the caterpillar in its cocoon. If you reach down and cut it free before the butterfly can struggle and break free on its own it will die. It needs that adversity that struggle, to exercise its wings first before it will be strong enough to spread its beautiful wings and fly away.

Don't take this to mean that I'm opposed to change, social reform or that each of us shouldn't do our parts to make the world a better place. If you feel compelled to an action you must follow your heart. I'm not suggesting any of us should let a hungry person starve or discontinue the peace talks between warring nations. All I'm saying is that we live in a realm of opposites, a balance of Yin/Yang principles, and this is just how it is. It's through the hard times in life that we grow the most that our characters are defined, and I believe people would be much more satisfied and happy with their lives if they could keep this in mind when the going gets tough.

Take a look at my life. My parents conceived me when neither was mentally or financially prepared to raise another kid. They loved me dearly and tried their very best to raise me right and teach me NOT to follow in their footsteps, yet I was sucked into a life of drugs and crime and wanted to do things my way, since I knew it all already anyway. Ultimately, and here's a lesson for your kids, I made the choices that led me to prison. Had it not been for me my father wouldn't have murdered our neighbor, I wouldn't have been out robbing and accumulating a juvenile record and destroying so many lives in the process. I take full responsibility for my life. Sure, my environment conditioned me and influenced the life choices I made, as did my genetic proclivities, yet, there's no excuse to be made for my selfish actions. Others in far worse circumstances than my own made it out of their environments and made something of themselves, whereas I failed miserably. I wasn't strong enough to overcome my milieu or myself. And so I ended up in prison for the rest of my life, wallowing in states of despair, self-loathing and self-flagellation. My entire life has been a struggle through extreme adversity.

And here's my point: I am who I am today because of the life I have lived. If you take it all away, put a silver spoon in my mouth or decrease even a fraction of my struggles and life's experiences, well, I would be a completely different person than who I am at this moment. And today I happen to love the person I am and the direction I am continually growing towards.

Who am I today? Well, after 10+ years on death row, and 17 years total in prison, I have grown in many ways. The first few years on the row I spent distracting myself, creating diversions to keep my mind from focusing on what needed to be internally worked on. I lived with a tremendous amount of pain and pent up energy. The anger and hate I had for others and our justice system were projections for what I felt about myself. As my understanding in psychology expanded and I began to journey introspectively and resolve psychological scars that tormented me, to seek balance and peace within myself

and the universe, I could finally begin to learn to live again. I had to battle my demons in order to restore psychological balance. For instance, it wasn't until I got to death row that I realized my ignorant and hateful views on race were a reflection/projection of how I felt about myself, that I'd constructed a complex ideology totally rooted and parallel to the things I most disliked about me. I used to go on tangents about the criminality exhibited by the black youth of America, how it needs to be addressed and curbed, but the truth was that I was talking about myself the entire time and didn't even realize it. It's a truth that we project onto others the things we most hate about ourselves. Carl Jung said that our shadow selves, the part of our psyches that we store repressed emotional themes and the aspects of our personalities we dislike, is represented by what we hate/dislike in others. You are what you hate. The only way to heal is to face your shadow self, as represented by the demons, dragons and antagonists in all mythology, fairy tales and literature, to uncover and disclose these repressed complexes and resolve them. I battled my demons for years –and still do as I'm far from complete – before I could begin to live in peace again. Somehow, I believe it took me coming here, living the life of extreme adversity that I have, in order to conquer my shadow and grow in the ways I have. It's not to say that people can't and don't learn in other less extreme situations, they certainly do, or even that everyone in prison makes the effort to learn and grow, but for me personally I needed this. I needed to have my life ripped away from me, to face a hopeless situation and experience great loss and pain in order to finally break through and spread my own wings.

So, I no longer recoil from life and the struggles I face. I feel like the harder it gets the stronger I get, and I embrace the tough times as opportunities for change and growth.

Another way in which I believe I've grown involves a revolution of thought. As I've recounted here, I've explored the depths of my being, the realms of philosophy, theology, history and literature as I sought spiritual understanding and awareness. I abandoned the Christian faith because I was reading the symbols literally, and I couldn't reconcile the physical and historical impossibilities to my consciousness viewing them that way. I had always thought that if I searched long and hard enough I would discover the One True God. In my mind's eye it was a personal God, an anthropomorphization of some sort of white-bearded diety with the personality and characteristics of a human. Every single religion I delved into I did so with this attitude and, consequently, none of them added up. I disregarded them all as contrived fairy tales to help people grapple with death, struggles in life, and to, ultimately, control the masses.

Robert in California introduced me to Joseph Campbell and his classic "The Hero With A Thousand Faces" back in November of 2005. Campbell was one of the world's finest and most knowledgeable comparative mythologists. He had studied people and their cultures, religions and traditions from all over the world for about 60 years, and he left an extensive body of material expressing his illuminating discoveries. Through Campbell,

I realized that mythology/religion, in fact the entire spectrum of human art, creativity and thought is a product of our collective unconscious, a term Jung used to mean the psychic connection all humans share. There are various functions of mythology. To reconcile our consciousness to the preconditions of life, namely, that it feeds off itself. You must eat life to live. The Native Americans had many rites they observed before the kill, an agreement with the animals, as do most cultures. Another function of mythology is to guide us through the stages of life from childhood to the grave. The symbols of mythology parallel to psychological functions as well. Take the story of The Frog Prince. The little girl loses her ball into the dark water. The frog appears with her ball and says he'll return it with one condition: kiss me. She makes the deal and gets her ball back, but doesn't keep her end of things and skips off home without kissing the frog. So the frog appears all over the place in her life such as the dinner table, bathroom, and her bedroom. She finally completes the deal and the frog turns into a handsome prince. You see, the ball is a sphere and it symbolizes the girl's wholeness of being, a balance in her psychology. She loses her ball in the dark water, a symbol for her subconscious, where we keep our repressed aspects of our personalities. The shadow self is represented by the frog and she must enter the water area and come to terms with her shadow, kiss the frog, in order to restore her ball, wholeness of being. Then what happens? The dark and ugly shadow self (frog) turns into a complementary aspect of her personality, her animus or male part of herself. There's a balance now, and this is the aim of many of these mythologies.

From Campbell, Carl Gustav Jung, Sir Walter Frazer and many others my old questions about the incongruences of religions/myths began to fade. Religions and myths are not intended as historical accounts, and we are remiss to interpret them literally. When people do this they begin to think that one way is the right and only way, and such foments religious intolerance. This is the number one cause of wars throughout history. It explains the conflicts in the Middle East, the intolerance and ignorance of many conservative Christians, Muslims and Jews, the crusades, the witch burnings, inquisitions and all of such horrors by those who believed their way of viewing God was the only way.

A closer examination of the religions/myths of the world showed me the many parallels and common motifs between them. They are all using different languages, but the essence of the symbols are universal and, interpreted as metaphors, they point in the same direction. Think of Jesus being tempted in the desert by Satan. So was Siddhartha (the first Buddha) by the deities of fear and desire, Kāmā-Mārā. The Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree (wood) and awakened to his true Self, Oneness of being, whereas Jesus achieved atonement with the Father under the wood of the cross. At-ONE-ment with the godhead. Both paved paths to spiritual awakening, and either is useful if we can learn to read the symbols.

What I discovered is that all these myths are saying the same things, just using different metaphors. In the Poetic Veddas of the Hindus it says, “Truth is one; the sages speak of it by many names.”

With this in mind I explored the esoteric and mystical traditions of the world. The themes in them all spoke to my spirit, helped awaken me, and I learned to look inside myself and see my true Self; the Self that connects everyone and everything. The world of separation is an illusion. All energy is connected. Through our senses we perceive division and separation, and the goal of the mystic is to lift the veil, open the mystical third eye, and glimpse eternity. Death and separation are “tricks” of the mind.

Some of the great mystics of the world helped open my third eye to the ebb and flow of existence. Heraclitus said, “all is in flux, everything’s changing;” the Greek sage and mathematician Pythagoras said, “All things are changing, nothing dies;” In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna counsels Arjuna at the battle field, “The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist.” The idea is that we each hold god within us. Not just humans, but every tree, stone, river, mountain and particle in existence. In the West, it’s about a relationship to the divinity. You aren’t God; the best you can do is form a relationship with Him. Those that claimed to be at one with God, like Jesus or the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj, were crucified. But in the East, as well as the mystic traditions of the world, there’s an all-pervading source of being permeating the universe, and we are all connected to it. Campbell said, “In the East that which is absolutely transcendent of all knowledge is the basis of your own being. It is you; it’s immanent within you. In the Chhandogya Upanisad we get the Sanskrit phrase, “Tat Tvam Asi!” Thou art that. You yourself are that divine mystery in which you seek. However, this “you” isn’t the persona complex you identify with, the phenomenon is space-time.” The Hindus called it Brahman, the Oneness that is all existence, and the spell of Mājā, the illusion of the senses, creates the world of separation we perceive.

Exploring mysticism and the realms of Eastern philosophy ignited a fire in me and I intuitively recognized the truth in my discoveries, but it wasn’t until I began to immerse myself into the world of modern physics that I had my true epiphany, my Ah-HA! moment. Physicists have revealed some startling discoveries since the beginning of the 20th century. Energy is everything. Every particle in existence is inextricably interconnected to the electromagnetic field. Energy never, ever, ever dies; it transforms. Since the Big Bang we haven’t lost a single quanta of energy. There’s a fundamental quantum field from which all matter emerges into being. Subatomic particles such as electrons and protons combine to form atoms, elements, molecules, cells, genes, and all the matter in the cosmos. According to physicist Fritjof Capra, “The quantum field is the fundamental physical entity, a continuous medium which is present everywhere in space. Particles are merely local condensations of the field; concentrations of energy which come

and go, thereby losing their individual character and dissolving into the underlying field.” Einstein said, “We may therefore regard matter as being constituted by regions of space in which the field is extremely intense... There’s no place in this new physics for both the field and matter, for the field is the only reality.”

So, the mystics of the world were onto something. Everything is interconnected to this field, this ONENESS of energy. Separation is an illusion because if we could see into the depths of the subatomic world we’d at once realize everything is connected, ONE: The further I delved into the mysteries of quantum mechanics and theoretical physics, the clearer I could see. The things that caught my attention was how observer and observed in these experiments are interlinked and inseparable. Physicists set up these dual-slit experiments when studying the photon and in some cases the photon behaves as a particle, in others a wave. Erwin Shrödinger’s “wave function” interested me because it involves a human observer (consciousness) collapsing the wave function, turning it either into a wave or particle. Before observation, all particles are simultaneously waves and particles. Not one or the other, but BOTH AT ONCE: it is with our conscious minds that we create the realm of opposites and collapse Shrödinger’s wave function, which is a fundamental principle in modern physics. The implications of this blew my mind. Now I better understand what the Buddha meant when he said; “We create the worlds with our minds.”

The photon has preoccupied me over the past year. You see, there are four fundamental forces in the universe: the strong force, weak force (both deal with the nucleus of atoms), gravity, and electromagnetism. As I said, everything is electromagnetic. And the force particle of electromagnetism? The photon. So, light is in everything. It is in fact, omnipresent, all-pervasive. Einstein’s theory of relativity states that the higher the velocity an object the slower it experiences time and the more its mass decreases. Thus, the photon, which is the cosmic speed limit at 186,262 miles per second, is both massless and it does not experience time at all. Time stops at light speed since it is relative to observed and observer and there’s no frame of reference for the ultimate speed. So here we have light participating in the space/time continuum, yet transcending it at the same time... The light from the sun is the source of all our power, all life, and thus so many cultures have worshipped the sun for millennia. It’s through light and by light that we experience life. What I find so incredibly illuminating and mysterious all at once is the fact that we all have the light within us. It now makes perfect sense when Jesus said, “I’m the light and the life and no one comes to the father but by me.” Or what the mystics mean by being en-LIGHT-ened, discovering the light inside each of us that is our true Self, the energy connecting all of existence.

Tat Tvam Asi! Thou Art That. You are that energy, the light, and becoming aware of it allows you to let the light shine through you with love as you become awakened.

One of my greatest lessons in life has been learning how to live in the moment, which I’ve yet to truly master. It doesn’t matter if you believe in a metaphysical existence or

think that anything beyond the physical plane of existence is hogwash. What really matters is living life, which is what we are here to do. Too many times we think that true peace of mind and happiness is something external, something we acquire outside of ourselves, but it only comes from within. It doesn't matter how hot you are, what you own or possess, or even how many loving people you are surrounded by. Peace must come from within. We've got to first conquer the demons of the shadow self, restore balance, and still our minds in order to learn to be content and aware each moment.

It took years of struggle and pain, but I finally figured this out. Today I am learning what it means to truly live in love of each moment. People who are depressed and spiraling into states of negativity and fear are trapped by thoughts of the past and future; their minds are everywhere but the present. They wallow in what-might've-beens and a past that can't be changed; they live in fear and worry of an unknown and unpredictable future, and in doing so they miss the moment at hand. I've found that if we can learn to stay aware and focused in each moment the world becomes a beautiful and mysterious place again. Life flows through you. The moment is all that exists. There are so many lessons inherent in each moment, and they are so easy to miss, but when we still our minds from all fear of the future and regret of the past, we then find true peace of mind and happiness.

This is the philosophy I've incorporated in my life. Today, I can laugh, sing, get wrapped up in a good book, write straight from my heart, enjoy an awesome exchange of energy with the people I encounter, watch the sunset or sunrise and marvel at the beauty of existence, or whatever it is that I happen to be doing in any given moment and truly experience it with love and openness. This is what it means to stop and smell the flowers. Don't get caught up in the struggles of life and allow them to wear you down. They come and go, and serve to help you grow and become. Rumi said, "Embrace every moment as if you chose it yourself." Because on some level you did. There's something here for us all to learn. No matter where we find ourselves in life, be it in poverty, with all the money you can spend in ten lifetimes, a run-down apartment or even the belly of the beast – death row – peace and happiness can be yours and the world can be a mysterious and beautiful place. Just try to live in love each moment.

Robert Pruet

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