

their belongings to slink away in agitated bops. I didn't catch the eye of the disliked one. And appearing, coming across the baseball field, was more neighborhood.

Melvin was a mainliner by the time the summer ended. And I had fallen deeper. On as slow a day as you could get in the streets, on one of those Sundays when wasn't no money happening for nobody, my nose started running and I got a few cramps in my stomach. As definite as registered mail, the chippie had arrived. I told myself what most novice addicts did: I could stop whenever I wanted. I didn't though. I took the whole conundrum back to the portrait of the peg-legged governor.

## VII

Back at Stuyvesant I became obsessed with college. I daydreamed about it constantly, wishing I could forgo the final two years of high school. I even made certain practical moves.

Having a study period in my schedule, I volunteered to work in the college office under Mr. Wechsler whose son, in fact, was in my home-room section. I read all the information that came in about colleges, application procedures, standardized tests, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid. I wrote away for numerous catalogs to be sent to my home. At one time I thought my sister would benefit from them also since she was in her senior year, but she joined the maternity club and didn't make it out that term. I shared them with Gary who was rather disinterested. I think he knew he wasn't graduating either.

Heroin was the first thing that I feared could make me late. No, not like for a class, appointment, or job, but late in life. Although I hadn't always fulfilled my best capacities, I had still managed to make it on time to the places I needed to be. But you don't cheat dope for long. It collects its dues.

Gym classes were expressly participatory. We had to be in uniform every day and I didn't feel like being bothered with responding to Mr. Davis's ever-insistent urging to "move with alacrity." I dressed for gym sporadically, finally failing it. However, it was a minor subject and the grade wasn't computed as part of my academic average, so I really wasn't too upset. After all, I was holding on in the classroom. I could still keep much of my act going. Get down with Trigonometry and Chemistry and Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. A 90 average was a thing of the past but I ran high eighties for the fall semester, which wasn't too shabby among the eager beaver, one-dimensional, no social concern types. They had no interest in the Mark Rudd parts of Columbia or the Free Speech Movement aspect of Berkeley.

Failing the gym class was just a warning of course. The overall inevitable decline soon followed. So that spring, while Ronald Reagan was sending the National Guard into Berkeley and imposing a curfew on the town, and Black students with guns held control of a building at Cornell, my main pursuit was for money for drugs.

I became involved in a series of crimes that initially ranged from purse snatching to burglary. Ripping off some White woman down in Jackson Heights, descending through the skylight of a cleaners or grocery store, squeezing through air ducts to plunder concession stands inside the airport, lifting television sets from those airport area motels where they hadn't yet been bolted down. It was convenient and sometimes crucial to have ready transportation, so stealing cars became part of the curriculum. You looked mostly for GM models. Back then GM was still using the old "turn ignition," the kind that could be activated without use of a key, that is, if the owner were careless. If he or she only turned the knob to the "off" position and not the "lock" position, you could start the car simply by turning the knob back to "on." At other times, you would take car keys obtained through various means and roam the streets trying them on like models. It never took long to find a fit. Sophistication wasn't necessary, no hot wiring or anything like that.

As the heroin plague infested the neighborhood, a network of petty gangsters was formed, daily circumstances of need and greed often determining which members of this network would get together on a given occasion. By being in the network you came to know who was reliable, who had heart, who was likely to snitch, who could stand the weight.

I was a pretty good wheel man by the summer of 1969. That July I had a shiny blue 1968 Oldsmobile Cutlass with a black vinyl top. One Saturday, in fact, the day before Man first walked on the moon, I handled a wheel job for a couple of local union members. Afterwards I got high, went to a couple of parties, and spread some favors around in case I needed to ask for some in the future. It was past four by the time I stashed the car and went home, only to find that I couldn't get in. Moms was enforcing her new regulation that if I didn't come home at a decent hour she would make sure I didn't get in. The rule was a good one. A seventeen-year-old had to have the wrong reasons for keeping the hours I wanted to keep, and some lessons had to be learned the hard way. That was an understanding and, I think, a strength my mother had. On the other hand, she hadn't grasped, and understandably so, the enormity of the problem with her son. First-generation northern urban youth were hard to figure.

I shrugged off my little housing problem and went back to fetch the Oldsmobile. Along the way I ran into Gary and a guy named Blue, so

the three of us went to the diner on Junction Boulevard and then over to 127. The sun had risen and I was wide awake. I had barely settled down with the newspaper to read about the escapade to the moon when it started to rain. I thought of running for the car, but instead I went along with a suggestion to break into the school. We went through a front window in full view of a man out walking his dog. As you might suspect, the police arrived a few minutes later.

I was at a table in the cafeteria when I spotted the patrol car pulling up along 25th Avenue. Calling to Gary and Blue, who were using their newspapers as pillows, I dashed for the far exit. They scrambled for the door near the window through which we had entered. Theirs was a poor choice, I figured. Too close to the patrol car. However, the police apparently caught sight of me running toward the other exit and pulled the car up to that door just as I was emerging. I spotted Gary and Blue getting away. I ducked back inside and ran up a stairwell, finally settling into a hiding place in the dark fourth floor gymnasium. It was to no avail. An officer came in brandishing a flashlight and I was busted. He cuffed my hands tightly behind my back, his partner said I smelled like a goat, and they accused me of having stolen typewriters from the school for weeks. I didn't say anything in response.

At the 114th precinct I was interviewed by a detective who seemed primarily interested in my accomplices.

"O.K. pal, you want to tell me about the two guys who were with you?"

"What two guys?"

"Look buddy, I'm asking the questions. Understand?"

"I don't know them. I have seen them once or twice. But I don't know their real names and I don't know where they live."

"O.K. It's your ass up the river by yourself." And that, surprisingly, was it. No real pressure to make me squeal.

For arraignment I was taken over to Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Weekend court. I was placed in a cell by myself. As one of the legal aid people was coming down the line to do the customary interviews, the man in the next cell called me, though at first I didn't realize he was addressing me in particular.

"Yo homes, next door. Next door, homes. You."

"You talkin to me?" I asked apologetically. But as soon as I asked the question in that fashion I told myself to be more assertive, though not defiant.

"Yeah man. You. You hear that punk comin down here for the info. Fuck him. Don't tell him nothin. He ain't gonna do nothin for you. Askin all them bullshit questions. What you got this time?"

*This time?* I wondered. I thought the veterans asked “*first time in kid?*” or something like that. Well, I sure wasn’t going to give away that it was my first. What if my mother didn’t show and I had to remain in this joint for awhile? It was a thought which just sneaked up and horrified me.

“Burglary” I responded, trying to make it sound like murder one.

“Yeah? Well don’t tell this punk nothin cause he ain’t doin nothin for you.”

By this time the interviewer had reached this man’s cell.

“I just want to ask you a few questions for the report.”

“Man, get the fuck out of here. Who you kiddin? I got one bid in already. They droppin four armed robberies on me now. What kinda fuckin probation am I gettin? Or bail? Or any of that fuckin shit.”

“But it’s for your own good.”

“Fuck you I said. Leave me the fuck alone.” Then he called to me. “Don’t tell em nothin youngblood.”

“I have to” I told him, the words fluttering hesitantly from my mouth. “I can walk on this one. It’s a meatball.”

“Go ahead then” he advised after a pause. “But I’m tellin you homes, they ain’t gon do nothin but fuck you up.”

I was out early that afternoon. Paroled in the custody of my mother. Caught a legal aid attorney who happened to be a graduate of Stuyvesant High. He showed me his ring and said he couldn’t understand what a fellow peg leg was doing in criminal court. So I sanitized the explanation as much as I could. Presented the whole matter as harmless mischief, that’s all. Same way with Moms. Left the drug part out. Though in two more days she would know it all.

Wallace and I were on a fundraising mission. I still had the Cutlass and Wallace had a .22 revolver. I was no stickup kid but had confidence that we could handle something minor, you know, not get in over our heads.

Wallace had scouted a few sites down in Elmhurst and Woodside that he thought were worth another look. We picked up another local desperado named Tango, who was alleged to have enough nerve in matters like these, and were on the go, Wallace directing me to a Chinese laundry on 31st Avenue. We circled the block after passing the laundry, parking in the side block a car length or two shy of the avenue. There was a fire hydrant in front of us so the odds were we wouldn’t get jammed in by another car. The getaway would be smooth. I left the keys in the ignition as Wallace and I exited the car. Then Tango got cold feet on us.

“I’ll lay and get the seats ready.”

“Seats ready?” Wallace exploded. “Man, what the fuck are you talking

about? You suppose to be the lookout. Don't tell me you can see around corners."

"What's happening Wallace? I thought you double checked his references."

"Jay and them boys said he was cool. Fuck it. You still down?"

"Yeah." Wallace was already several yards ahead of me. I told Tango to wait right there.

There were no customers when we entered the laundry, only the woman behind the counter who had a fit when Wallace pointed the pistol at her. She began backing away slowly, shaking her head "no no no" with her hands pressed up against the sides of her face. She formed words with her mouth but no sound issued forth. I had leaned across the counter to open the cash register when a man came from the rear of the establishment. Upon seeing us his first impulse was to charge, but the image of Wallace leveling the pistol at him made him change his mind. He retreated, not with a look of fright, but as though he had an equalizer. I grabbed a small stack of bills and scooted out the door just ahead of Wallace. We sprinted around to the car, I fired up the engine, and we were in the bleachers at 127 in a matter of minutes. Tango was still with us but we ignored him until, after watching me divide the money evenly between Wallace and myself, he inquired, "What about me?"

"Should I shoot him?" Wallace asked me.

"Naw man," I replied, my mind on the real business at hand. "We ain't got time for that."

"Only take a second."

"Naw man, stop jiving." However, I wasn't totally convinced he was. Tango was quietly pathetic, what you might call a hope fiend.

The take was mostly singles, less than \$20 altogether. We could get high but not complacent, and later that evening we were back on the prowl. This time we picked up Smitty, a bit undersized but generally game, although the pistol thing was new for him too.

We cruised out to Woodside to case a bakery, but it was too busy. We looked at a few drugstores and liquor stores but at least one of us would have an objection, would sense that something wasn't quite right. Frustrated, I began to think that my opinions were the only valid ones, that Wallace and Smitty were losing their heart.

Working back to the east, back through Corona-East Elmhurst, on through Flushing, we eventually wound up on Bell Boulevard in Bayside. There was a drugstore we all agreed was ripe for the picking. No one inside but the proprietor, chubby, balding, White, our type. Wallace and I approached the counter as Smitty stationed himself by the entrance.

"This is a stickup" my partner declared as I made my move for the register.

"Oh yeah?" the intended victim responded. Without flinching he reached down and drew a gun. Fortunately, my instincts had me backing away. The barrel of that gun seemed so huge he wouldn't have had to shoot to capture me. He could have lassoed me. By the time I turned to take full flight, Wallace and Smitty were scooting out of the door. If not for the situation I would have laughed at how they seemed to go through the doorway simultaneously, the doorway actually seeming to expand as in a cartoon.

We were entering Corona an hour or so later still not having made any money. As we rolled down Roosevelt Avenue up under the El train, we saw a White pedestrian entering the parking lot of Shea Stadium.

"Let's get him" Smitty suggested.

"Fine with me" I responded, slowing the car down only to speed up again when it turned out that the headlights of an approaching vehicle belonged to a patrol car. I held the Oldsmobile steady, tried to stay relaxed. I picked up the patrol car in the rearview mirror and watched it recede into the distance.

"Everything's cool" I reassured. "They ain't notice nothin." But the moment to hit the new target had been lost. I proceeded along Roosevelt. At the corner of 111th Street I spotted another White man descending the stairs leading from the train station.

"I'm getting him" I said impulsively and sprang from the car.

"No Keith no" I heard Wallace calling behind me. He was following me but I was gone. I pushed the man hard against the wall of a building.

"Now gimme that money!"

"Take it. Take it." he shrieked. As I went to empty his pockets a patrol car was screeching to the curb right behind us. This is what Wallace had been trying to warn me about. The instant I turned I could see the car almost hit Wallace who then started running back across Roosevelt. The man tried to grab me but I elbowed him viciously in the solar plexus, spinning around and following that up with a right cross to the jaw. He staggered, a cop was closing in, lights were swirling, I couldn't comprehend the shouting.

I took off down Roosevelt. As luck would have it, I happened to be on the longest block in the area. I could hear the cop behind me. That wasn't my major problem. Unless he were Bob Hayes in disguise, he didn't figure to be able to run me down. No, the major problem was that if the officer in the car chose to pursue me rather than Wallace, he could easily cut me off on the long straightaway.

Cutting into an alley, I encountered a high fence topped with a short row of barbed wire and didn't hesitate to scale it. I ripped my shirt going over but managed to jump down to the other side and scurry behind a clump of bushes just as the cop entered the alley.

"Freeze" he bellowed, his gun drawn. Hell, I wasn't planning to move at all. Figured I would blend into the scenery and make him think I had escaped. There was another fence to climb and no way I could make it.

He shined a flashlight. "Come out of those bushes with your hands up." I thought about trying to escape but with the losing streak I was on, I knew better than to count on a fence to block bullets. So I surrendered. The patrol car turned into the alley with no prisoner inside. Just me and the law again.

I was arraigned the next morning in Kew Gardens. The judge did a double take at my yellow sheet, realizing that my prior arrest had been only three days before.

"Appears as though he needs a rest" he considered before setting a cash bail of one thousand dollars.

My mother turned to me, repressed hurt and anger twisted together in her face, and whispered tersely, "I guess you're satisfied."

I used my phone privilege to call Uncle Howard, my best, perhaps only shot at bail. He said he would see what he could do. In the meantime I was on my way to Rikers Island, cell block 5, cell 5A6. Like most folks who made it to the Island, I turned reflective. I would lie on the top bunk staring at the red light bulb above the cell door mulling how I got to this part of the script, the trip, whatever. Got to the part with the stomach cramps. No sensationalized Hollywood gorilla jones stuff. Just a baby monkey thing I could handle. Every morning you could see at least one inmate with a strong habit, or maybe a weak constitution, fall out in the mess hall. Actually, you could have admitted to being a drug user on entering the facility, but that made you a registered addict in the new Rockefeller Program. There were early advantages for some in terms of medication and leniency, but the state kept more tabs and labels on you in the long run. Copping to the Rockefeller only made sense if you had a heavy beef, but if the beef were too heavy they wouldn't let you cop anyway.

Got to the part of worrying about time. After all, I was caught red-handed. Wasn't like I should waste the court's time and anger a district attorney by pleading innocent.

Got to the great reunion. Half the neighborhood was on the Rock. All the folks whose falls I had heard about and the ones whose disappearance I hadn't stopped running long enough to notice. Even old Lonnie Blair, who was all smiles when we ran into each other during a movement.

He broke from his line to greet me with a hug. The officer in charge let him get away with it.

Got to the around-the-clock fear. Avoiding direct eye contact but not shying away from it all the time either. Didn't want to issue challenges or have to accept any. But if I had to, I was committed to rumbling, to holding my own.

Conversations filled with lies echoing up and down the tiers. Ass kickings promised on the lockout. Landing in the day room watching news broadcasts monopolized by the trip to the moon.

I was supposed to be only fourteen months away from college. I had to get back on track. The dope game was a sucker play, not just in terms of lost opportunities. That was the obvious part. But more interesting was to understand drugs in terms of being controlled by others. This Black cop really made me see that one night on Northern Boulevard. He pounded his beat, taking his payola here and there, but he left a gem for me. He asked me had I ever seen any ocean liners dock in Flushing Bay or any 747s land on the Boulevard. Since I hadn't and told him so, he wondered how I didn't know that the only way I could get any heroin was because there were some people who wanted me to have it. It was not so much self-destruction that I was engaging in, but designed destruction.

By the time Uncle Howard came to get me I was ready to tell him, my parents, and anyone else who cared to listen what the hustle was all about and how I resolved to beat it. It's just that resolve didn't yet hold the upper hand with me.

## VIII

I felt old for someone still in high school. Like if I did manage the course load, get a favorable disposition from the court, beat the latest phase of my drug involvement, and gain admission to college, I might be too worn out to attend.

A few of the brothers also started to age too much, began experimenting with heroin. I tried to discourage them as Melvin had done for me, but of course they didn't listen which, in one sense, was fine. They made my hustle safe and easy. You see, heroin usually cost more in their communities. So I would cop deuces in Corona, bring the supply to school, and give them a bargain. Give them two bags for seven, say, if they were used to fours. This would work until they traveled more and/or prices stabilized all over town. The few dollars generated were plentiful. I didn't have a habit. Knew I couldn't afford to ride that white pony hard with two cases already before the court. Besides, I really did talk to myself a lot about quitting.

Attempting to fit some productive activities in my schedule, I took a job uptown at the arcade next to the Apollo Theater. Needed to save for future educational expenses. At that point I didn't worry much about high school matters. I could do enough in class to get by and make sure my average didn't slip too far. No school official mentioned my legal problems so I assumed none of them knew how I had spent part of my summer vacation.

I scored a shade under 1200 on the SAT which wasn't too poor given the circumstances. And I sifted through my catalogs at home, focusing in on the University of Connecticut and the University of Notre Dame. My average was four or five points off what I desired, but because of my test scores and the fact that both schools were making highly publicized efforts to recruit Blacks, I managed to receive scholarship offers from both. Against the advice of my English teacher from the previous year, who thought the atmosphere would prove too constricting, I chose Notre Dame. Had visions of dusting off my athletic skills and becoming a scholar-athlete of renown.

During the fall semester I handled my academic subjects as expected. But I failed gym once again, my attendance being so spotty. This forced me into the position of taking back-to-back gym classes during the spring semester. On many occasions those were the only two classes for which I showed up. English was on my schedule after gym. When I bothered to stick around, I didn't really participate. I might ask why we couldn't discuss books like *The Outsider* and *Manchild in the Promised Land* only to get a retort about curriculum and classics. Sometimes I would sit at my desk in the back row (my usual position in all classes by then) and model social consciousness rhetoric into the form of the Shakespearean sonnet.

When I was off in my own world in class one day, a student in the next aisle patted my arm to get my attention and motioned toward the rear door of the classroom. I saw the big blond dean, Mr. McGinn, and my shop teacher, cool black-haired Mr. Valenti, peering through the thick glass. McGinn beckoned me and I responded while trying to figure out what he wanted. McGinn didn't frighten me. I had hookied too much, cut too many classes, had too much raw, real world experience to be shaken up by a high school dean. But although he couldn't scare me, he could antagonize me endlessly, warning me that I didn't have it made yet, that the school in Indiana was but a phone call away.

"Are you tired Raymond? It doesn't seem as if you're especially interested in English." His tone was matter-of-fact, not accusatory.

"Well you know" I replied while remaining civil. "I have those two gym classes."

"Are you sure that's it? Take a little stroll with us. It'll energize you."

"Energize?" I laughed. "I told you I am *enner-vated*."

"Aw come on" Mr. Valenti intoned mildly. To myself I asked *what's the angle?* as I consented to walk.

When we came to an empty classroom, Mr. Valenti opened the door and McGinn asked me to step inside and take a seat. My mind was fully puzzled by then, but I didn't have to remain agitated for long. Clarity was cloaked in the dean's next request.

"Would you roll up your sleeves please?"

"What?"

"Would you roll up your sleeves?"

"For what? You think I'm a magician or something?"

However, the real question was how he finally put it together. *Observations? Probably where Valenti comes in. A court inquiry? A snitch?*

"Just roll them up" he snapped. Actually I didn't mind obeying his order. I wasn't carrying anything and was curious to see what they knew. However, in complying with McGinn's request I felt compelled to remind him that he didn't strike me as being the least bit intimidating.

"No problem" I stated while staring defiantly into his eyes.

I unfastened the cuff buttons on my shirt and rolled the sleeves up past the elbow. I thrust my arms forward in a gesture that indicated I had nothing to hide.

McGinn took my arm, the left one first, the one hardly ever pricked. Then he examined the right arm and saw, along the thickest vein, the pattern of needle marks, one as fresh as that morning, as well as the skin made dark and callous by prolonged puncturing.

"So you're using dope."

"Used to, which is not exactly the scoop of the year." Then I looked up at Mr. Valenti, who seemed mesmerized by my arm, and decided to lighten up. "As I said, I used to. But I stopped."

"What about these needle marks?"

"They're old" I said evenly. "Very old."

I'm sure McGinn didn't believe me, but he seemed confused. He took Mr. Valenti over near the door where they consulted in whispers, eventually deciding that I should be taken across the street to be examined at Beth Israel Hospital. Parental permission was required for this, so my father was called. I wasn't unnerved by all the fuss; I mean it wasn't like I was being arrested. I could go to Beth Israel Hospital as long as it didn't turn into Rikers Island while I was there.

I repeated my claims to the attending physician, which he received with professional detachment. He was primarily interested in whether I

was presently under the influence, which I was not. He shined a light into my eyes, checked my reflexes, and had me sit in the emergency room for an hour or so before he informed me I was free to leave. That night I tried to ease my mother's worries. I told her I hadn't done any new wrong. Everything was old stuff.

The next day the guidance counselor, Mrs. Brody, called me in for a long talk. She was a nice person, engaging. This was serious talk. No sermonizing. Just a realistic look at things. She suggested I enroll as an outpatient at Greenwich House, a rehabilitation center over on 14th Street off Sixth Avenue. I walked over for the intake interview but didn't enroll.

I was around school less and less after that. Well on my way to a grand total of 56 official absences for the spring semester alone. Not to mention the classes cut after being marked present in homeroom. I didn't get interested in everyday attendance again until four students at Kent State University in Ohio were killed by the National Guard. There were demonstrations at the school and rallies over in Union Square. A relatively radical faction of students issued a demand for certain changes within the school and organized a student strike, which, in terms of numbers, was successful. In 1970 the spirit of the '60s had reached the White folks at Stuyvesant High. An assembly was called at which several instructors urged students to work through the system. Students blew off steam verbally. And in a few days it was back to business as usual although I don't recall that any concessions were made by the administration. Well, I already knew not to take White student activists too seriously. Boone had made me skeptical enough about that. But if I needed a more vivid reminder, the wait would not have been long. Five Black students were killed at Jackson State University in Mississippi, time for sho nuff demonstrations in my view, and the members of the relatively radical faction were too preoccupied with thoughts about graduation to interrupt classes again.

But not all the brothers were too busy. Several windows were smashed. The piano in the auditorium was set afire. Before stepping in line for their diplomas, they offered testimony as a new crop of eighteen year olds that Black martyrs also count.

After that particular fervor faded, I realized something that was perhaps the most incredible fact of my senior year. I still had a chance to graduate myself. I cleared court on the third of June, given youthful offender treatment, which meant that in return for my pleas of guilty my record would remain sealed if I encountered no further trouble with the law. My lawyer, proud of my scholarship, told me a joint or two was the best thing for loosening up. He said the hard stuff was strictly bad news.

The judge, after sentencing, instructed me to go to school, do well, and stay out of her courtroom. She sounded sincere.

I couldn't make any grades to speak of for the eighth semester, could sort of just squeak by the way I had left junior high school three years earlier. But classroom grades weren't the only concern at that point. Regents Examinations were required in several classes and there was a stipulation that students with more than 20 absences in a class would not be permitted to sit for an exam. However, Mrs. Brody pulled me over that hurdle, consulting all the parties involved in waiving the attendance requirement once I assured her I could pass the three exams I had to take.

I kept my end of the bargain. 82 in Physics. 79 in History. And English was the irony of ironies. There was an essay question on the overcrowded judicial system that I handled on the way to an 83. Despite passing the Regents, I was given a 40 in English, but it was decided at a special meeting that I would be given credit for the course and allowed to graduate. Time to bid old peg leg goodbye.

Advancing to college was another matter. I convinced myself that I would not show up on the campus of Notre Dame addicted to heroin. But the way I began to run the streets that summer, you would have thought I intended to kick on the bus ride to South Bend. I stole some more, did a little dealing, shot the highest dosages of dope I ever had. Jail was a more likely destination than a university.

Father Hepsburgh had his say on where I would be when he sent me a letter halfway through the summer canceling my admission. Said something about my not being ready for college at that time. No doubt he knew what he was talking about. But besides being angry, I wondered what the decision had been based on. Had my old adversary, the dean, tripped me with telephone wire? Did the folks out there know about the legal piece? Had it simply been the eighth semester grades or attendance?

My mother received the news stoically, probably thankful not to hear worse. I think my father had allowed himself to be more adventurous in his dreaming, so he appeared much more distraught. I tried to reassure him by telling him that although the past had caught up with me, I was in command of the present and would bounce back. Still make it. We called the University of Connecticut to see if the offer previously made could be reactivated. No chance. The scholarship had gone to someone else.

So there would be no college in September. After all those years putting in time with the White folks, they finally had the chance to leave me behind. That was bad enough, but I felt defeated among the brothers, especially in Corona, where I had been a bearer of collective hope. Sure we all ran together, but several of them depended on me not to be an

authentic loser in the end. Like Wallace, for example, recent recipient of a three-year sentence for robbery. He kept writing to tell me to tighten up the school thing.

Fortunately, there was encouragement to be found in the streets also. I had a friend named Alan Jennings, tough survivor in his own right, who was on his way to Queensborough Community College. Whenever we would come across each other that summer, he would have a pep talk for me or some advice. He suggested I apply for February admission to Queensborough, put in a few good semesters, and reevaluate my academic position at that point. Naturally the drug use would have to cease and I twice tried to quit on my own. However, because I knew I had my biggest habit yet, as soon as I caught a cramp I became fearful and, fully cognizant of how weak I was, dove back into the cooker. It took a newspaper headline to yank me out for good.

On August 8th the paper blared in bold print the story of how Jonathan Jackson walked into a courtroom in California, announced that he was taking over and had come to free his brother, celebrated prison writer George Jackson, and got himself smoked during the subsequent shootout. Most people on the street were buzzing about the derring-do involved, the fireworks. Most poignant to me was that Jonathan was only seventeen years old. Here was a kid younger than I who put his very life on the line because he still believed in dreams. Had to believe in them, that is, if he really thought he could pull off such a stunt. I understood dreams, idealism. I understood living in the future. But the trick is to know when the future has arrived.

Almost as soon as I finished reading the story I knew I was out of the drug life. The truth of that proposition was as clear as the bright caps of angry ocean waves hurtling toward a shore in clear darkness. A rhythmically sparkling clarity to which one who is amid the turbulence of the sea would be blind. That afternoon I visited my father. After watching a baseball game on television I announced I was spending the night. Dad was at the post office by then working the night shift, and I was certain to have the solitude I needed when I invited that often feared Jones to come on down.

Oh, the stomach cramps were there, the runny nose, the diarrhea, the chills alternating with outbursts of sweat. The first night was the worst of course, with no sleep to be had. But I rolled to and fro across the sheets, actually welcoming the struggle, the fluorescent peaks of those waves collapsing just before me. The images I hadn't gathered myself to decipher. Yo-yo heads bobbing up and down in nods of escapism decorating Northern Boulevard, Lenox Avenue, Eighth Avenue, Avenue D. Gor-

geous women transformed into apparitions of slurred speech and desperate thighs. Everyone scratching, lazily slapping their own faces. Yellow-eyed hepatitis sufferers. The man who needed no needle because he kept holes in his arm large enough to drip dope into them directly from the dropper. Spike marks in necks. Alongside vaginas. On penises. Drops of blood on my diploma because I got careless while showing it off to win a bet. Shoving ice down Gary's drawers after an overdose. Shooting a salt shot in his arms, walking him back to consciousness.

I welcomed it all, the sight, the roar. Keith was going to college.