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“We made the headlines, brother!”

For several nights before the robbery, I couldn't sleep. It would be my fourth attempted robbery, Dougie's fifth. Without me, he and Mess did one, which I learned about after we were caught. For the upcoming holdup we stupidly decided for the third time to use the same location and pretend to be calling from the same street address. The first time was somewhere else. Dougie and Mess also used a different location. Still, the police didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to determine the pattern. Plus, we always robbed pizza deliverers. You'd think we'd at least have had enough sense to rob a Chinese joint once in a while. Clearly we weren't criminal masterminds. Actually, we were downright stupid. If only I'd been smart enough to walk away from the robberies earlier, or had the strength to resist one last time. Things would have been very different, but not necessarily better. That's the odd thing about it. I often think I *needed* to get shot. It liberated me from a pointless existence, one that was thoughtless and uninspiring. I know, I know. I was only fifteen at the time. Nobody at fifteen is thinking like Gandhi. Most fifteen-year-olds are hoping their acne will clear up or they won't fail algebra. Nevertheless, getting shot turned me into a better human being, or at least into someone *trying to become* a better one. It's cornball stuff, for sure. But it's true. True to how I feel about it. True to how I felt then, and still do.

As the robberies mounted, I began to have a crisis of conscience. It started to seem all wrong. It's not as though I thought it was a sin, or even much of a crime for that matter. Nor did I picture myself being punished if we were caught, locked up in jail with hardcore convicts or burning in

Hell for eternity with unrepentant evildoers. I began wondering what my parents and others who knew me would think if I were caught. But even that wasn't uppermost in my mind. Discovery and punishment weren't exactly troubling me; I wasn't tossing and turning in bed over that prospect. Rather, I started thinking that what we were doing was rotting me from the inside. It was making me depraved. I decided to tell Dougie that it was over, without explaining why. I'd keep it simple. I'd just tell him I'd had enough, that I wasn't going to do it anymore. And that would be that. There was nothing else to say. I'd tell him on the very night we were going to stick up another driver. I'd catch him off-guard and he wouldn't have time to talk me out of it. When I was done thinking this plan through, it seemed foolproof.

Earlier that night Billy picked me up at my house. As I got into the car I continued going over how I'd tell Dougie the news, practicing it in my head. I also found an excuse to keep Billy waiting in the car so I could talk to Dougie alone. Dougie and I weren't old enough to drive, but a few of our close friends were, including Mess. And only Mess among them knew what we were doing. He knew because he'd turned us on to the idea of holding up pizza delivery drivers in the first place. He was one of them. He worked for a pizza parlor in the next neighborhood, New Dorp.

One summer night, as the three of us were huddled in a corner of the St. Charles schoolyard drinking beers and smoking a jay, he pitched the idea. The best time to do it was on a Friday, he said, when he would be working and when the owner's son would be making the last delivery of the day. He'd have a lot of cash on him.

"Right before his last run he takes all of the money from the drivers and from the cash register. After he makes his last delivery, he heads over to the bank to put it all in the night deposit box."

"Why Friday? Why not Saturday or some other night?"

"It's the only night he does it. The other nights his father brings it over directly to the bank after closing. On Fridays, the old man leaves early. Friday's a busy night, you know. And you know what that means."

"How will we know he's making his last delivery and has all of that cash?"

"That's where I come in. I'll wait around 'til right before he's closing. You'll wait for me somewhere where there's a pay phone so when you see me pull up you can make the call for the last order."

"But what if he gets another call while he's making our pie?"

"They always keep a couple of made pies, large ones, warming in the oven and whoever calls for them, that's it—they're done for the night."

“How much money will he be carrying?”

“Sometimes it could be as much as \$300.”

Dougie and I looked at each other. “Okay,” we said simultaneously. Mess laughed and said, “I knew you two were the right ones to talk to.”

After we were caught, Dougie resented Mess not only for introducing us to the idea but also for keeping his involvement unknown. According to Dougie, Mess was as guilty as we were, if not more so, because he was the brainchild—and absolutely nothing happened to him. Also, Mess was involved in the first robbery and another one with Dougie. It seemed unfair that I got shot and Dougie, who was sixteen, received a criminal record, whereas nothing happened to Mess, who was involved in carrying out two robberies and whom Dougie saw as the instigator or “master-mind” behind it all. I didn’t give a damn one way or the other. It didn’t matter to me how many times Mess was implicated or that he’d planted the seed, *and* that he didn’t pay a price for any of it. I didn’t blame Mess for what happened. It wasn’t his fault I almost got killed. Nor did I blame Dougie for persuading me to do another robbery, which sure did turn out to be our last. He thought I blamed him for that night, but I didn’t. Not in the least.

If Heraclitus is right, that a man’s character is his fate, then there was something about our characters back then that Mess identified as ripe for plunging into crimes and misdemeanors. It’s why he laughed when we so quickly agreed. He had properly read our characters. Either one of us could have said no, and it would never have happened. End of story. But both of us said yes; therefore, our destiny lay ahead of us, driven forward by our characters. And therein lies the rub, the paradox of *that* night and how it drove the transformation of my life many nights later. I had to be willing to take Mess’s bait, to “fall” first, or else the night I was shot would never have happened. It’s similar to the way in which some view Judas’s role in Christ’s most glorious moment. According to them, as Jesus’s best friend Judas *had* to betray him in order to set in motion the crucifixion and set the stage for his rebirth. I needed to be my own Judas. I had to mislead myself that night in order to trigger the subsequent “death watch” and encounter my own splendid moment in the ER—for my own rebirth, of sorts.

We arranged to meet Mess at a corner deli less than a mile from where he worked. A pay phone was attached to its outside brick wall. It was an ideal location. A few blocks from the deli we found a house with a large back and side yard, shaped like an inverted *L*, lined thickly with pine trees. After we made the call we could walk there and easily duck into the side

yard, able to see the front of the house. Mess would wait around the block on a parallel street in the getaway car.

The first time we tried it, it didn't work. Apparently the driver had left before we called. There was no answer when we did. The second time didn't pan out either because from the time Mess left to the time we called, another order came in. "I'm sorry," the store owner's son said. "I just sold my last one."

On the third try he picked up the phone and agreed to deliver a large cheese pizza to the address we provided. "I'll be there in less than ten minutes," he said. Dougie and I walked over to the spot we'd picked in which to hide. Waiting there would be less conspicuous than having Mess drop us off in front of it. We waited behind some thick shrubs planted between the trees. We had spray-painted black a purple water pistol we'd bought from Masters, the local department store, the one that replaced our giant reed-enclosed ball field. Dougie had grabbed a steak knife from his mother's kitchen drawer. We didn't know if the driver would turn over the money or laugh in our faces. What undoubtedly made us look convincing was that I wore a full-headed ski mask with only the eyes and mouth visible, and Dougie wore a stocking over his head.

Dougie insisted on holding the gun. He also said he'd do all of the talking. He was doing a hell of a lot of talking before the robbery, sounding like his favorite criminal movie characters. As we were crouched behind the bushes I could hear him breathing heavily. "My heart's racing," he said. I didn't reply. The car pulled up. We planned on robbing the driver before he went to the door. We couldn't let him ring the bell. Otherwise, he'd find out that no one at that address had made the call, and the person answering the door, suspicious of the driver, might watch him until he drove away. He got out of the car, opened the rear door, and pulled out the pizza box from the portable aluminum oven resting on the back seat. I reached for the ski mask stuffed in my jacket pocket. It was early spring and we were both wearing light jackets. I was wearing the same tan corduroy one I'd be shot in a few months from then in the fall. Dougie grabbed my wrist, clutching it tightly.

"Should we do it?" he asked.

"What?"

"What should we do?" He was still holding on to my wrist, more firmly now. He was scared but didn't want to admit it.

"What do you mean, 'What should we do?'"

"Fuck. I mean should we do it?"

"You were all gung-ho on this. Jesus."

"I was. I am. Fuck."

By then the driver was approaching the door. It was too late. But no one answered the bell. The people living in the house were evidently out and must have left the lights on to make it look as if they were home. The driver rang the bell several more times. There was still no answer. He stood dumbfounded on the large brick stoop, bordered by a waist-high black metal fence. He checked and rechecked the address written on the order slip taped to the box. He started walking down the six steps, looking back at the door a couple of times in case someone opened it. No one did.

"Give me that," I said, as I grabbed the water pistol from Dougie's hand and replaced it with the knife. "Here." I put on the ski mask and stood up without saying anything. Peripherally, I saw him reach into his jacket and pull out the stocking. I pushed through the opening between the shrub and the tree, and as I did I could hear Dougie doing the same behind me. For one of the few times in my life, I took the initiative. I'm still baffled as to why, of all times, it was just then.

Before that moment, I was a true follower, and thereafter as well, for a while. For a time, Dougie and I were inseparable. When it came to our friendship I often deferred to him. Perhaps I thought I was being a dutiful friend by letting him be top dog, no less than I became the dutiful son or the dutiful sibling and followed the lead of my family. When Dougie and I dressed up as Batman and Robin, I always played Robin. He never let me play Batman, but in all likelihood I may never have asked. When he was transferred to the other seventh-grade class with five other boys to separate the high-profile troublemakers in our class, he met a new group of friends. I eventually stopped playing with Crackers and Timmy Tomato, just as he did, and started hanging around with his new crowd, which included Mess.

I've gone over in my head many times why I picked then to take a leadership role, and it remains a mystery. Frankly, I'm largely interested in solving that mystery as a mind game, as I mentioned in an earlier chapter. I haven't exhausted too much brain matter trying to figure it out psychologically, turning myself inside out for a "criminal profile" of sorts. Really, it doesn't matter. What's done is done. I have to live with that decision, my actions, and the consequences—doing so with whatever Freudian or behavioral motives I assign to them, back then, now or later. Granted, it probably would have done me some good to talk about all of this to someone professionally, which I never did. It might even have helped to talk to *anyone* about it. But it was a package deal, as I've tried to explain: Do something entirely idiotic, get shot and almost die, and then

be advised never to talk about any of it ever again to anybody. I was on my own, not unlike all of the times I spent as a child when my parents separated and I was shuttled from one "babysitter's" house to another, often sitting in a room alone staring at the walls. Maybe that's even how I felt during the first robbery when Dougie froze: on my own. He'd talked and talked beforehand about how cool it was going to be and how he'd shove the gun in the guy's face and blah, blah, blah. When the moment came, though, he couldn't back up his braggadocio with his will. I ignored his fears and pressed on. He might as well not have been there. In many ways, he wasn't.

Before the pizza driver reached his car, we cut him off. I pointed the gun at him. It was weightless. It wasn't a "loaded" gun. There wasn't even any water in it, so I felt a bit silly. For our plan to work, something other than the props will have had to take hold.

"Holy shit!" he shouted. He was terrified. He began to shake uncontrollably. Later, we learned from Mess that he'd wet his pants. And that is what I am most ashamed about—not the robberies, not my parents' and sister's finding out about them, not any of that, but how I put the fear of God into this young man.

"Shut the fuck up," I told him in the most fearsome voice I could conjure. This was what took hold, conjuring. "Say another fucking word and you're dead."

I was playing a role, just like the two cops who would catch me months later. I can see myself doing it, without necessarily experiencing it. I won't feel this way again until the night I'm shot. I don't remember the other robberies. I can hardly recall a single detail from any of them. This one and the last one, of course, I remember vividly. A movie projector still runs through my head in Technicolor and Surround sound after having captured the events of that final robbery, and the first one. To this day, it remains crystal-clear to me, even though in writing this now I am playing the film back for the first time, from end to end, in more than thirty years.

"Hand over your money, asshole."

He pulled from the inside of his jacket a roll of bills held together with a rubber band. He sheepishly offered it to me. I practically ripped it from his hand.

"What about your wallet? You have a fucking wallet, right?"

This wasn't part of the plan. I could tell Dougie was getting tense. But I didn't see him. I didn't want to. Maybe we were taking too long. I didn't care. I pulled the cash from the driver's wallet—no more than a few dollars in it—and threw it to the ground.

"Okay, asshole," I said. "You count to a hundred before you get back in the car, or else we'll come back here and you'll regret it. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," he hurriedly replied. He wanted this to be over as fast as possible. "No problem."

We took off and ran to where Mess was parked. He saw us coming and, reaching around from the driver's seat, opened the back door. We jumped in, crushed together low so we couldn't be seen. Mess dipped below the steering wheel. In half a minute we heard the delivery guy tearing out of there. He raced fifty yards past us along a perpendicular street. There was no time for Mess to ask what happened. Dougie started bragging about how well it went, all on account of me.

"It was un-fucking-believable, Mess. You had to be there. Ba-kowsk was great, just fucking great," he said. He was excited again talking about it and he'd received an electric charge from it. Me, I was flat. "You should have heard him. *I* was fucking scared of him." Mess chuckled nervously. "And get this: He made the guy hand over his wallet." They both started laughing. I didn't. What had prompted me to do that? I wondered. Dougie was talking about something that had just happened, but it seemed light years before, or that he was talking about someone else. "You were beautiful," Dougie said.

But I didn't feel beautiful. That wasn't why I'd gone through with it, to impress Dougie or Mess, or anyone for that matter. At least I don't think so. Still, after all of these years, and after trying to sort it out, I can never be too sure of my main motivation. Despite all of my training in deconstructing stories, both imaginative and real, and reconstructing them, and then surrounding them with seemingly illuminating analysis, I must apply some doubt to my own thesis about that night, about that portion of my story. Decoding texts is one thing; decoding personal experiences is another. I'm quite aware of how subjectivity refracts and fractures vision, causing the past to be seen through rose-colored glasses or jaundice-ridden eyes. It's simply too subjective, way beyond the postmodern idea of "scientific" objectivity masquerading as subjectivity. As a result, perhaps there's no telling why I'd done it. No simple or sophisticated explanation: Because in some respect I was dead inside.

What I do know is that I didn't go through with the robberies to appear astonishingly cool or extraordinarily dangerous. In fact, I told no one about it. I may even have been ashamed of it from the start, whereas afterward I learned that Dougie had boasted about the robberies to several hardcore punks outside of our inner circle of friends. He attended a different high school from the one I did, and the guys he told eventually did

jail time, or ran away to Florida to escape it, or hid from other, higher-level criminals. Some ended up as I could have: dead. Dougie regarded the robberies as his entrée into a bona fide criminal crowd he deemed more powerful and more impressive than anything any other working-class groups of kids had to offer. The robberies also provided him with a certain mystique he craved. He actually fed it by conducting more crimes and getting into more trouble with more notorious hoodlums. Unfortunately for him, their criminal acts were carried out with even less cleverness than our robberies. He and a well-known teen gangster in Oakwood Heights attempted to stick up a toll booth attendant at the Verrazano Narrows Bridge from their car. When a vehicle pulled up immediately behind them, the collector rang a bell, jumped under the half-metal door frame, like the attendant in *The Godfather*, and in seconds a Port Authority police car blocked their front escape. And I thought *we* were idiots. What was next, I wondered after hearing about it—robbing airplane passengers in mid-flight without parachutes? The ineptitude didn’t deter Dougie from taking pride in what he was doing. He wasn’t in the least embarrassed by it, not by the stupidity of it or by the immorality. The same was true when we were caught. In his mind the robberies demonstrated that we had become special: A bad reputation beat none at all. If asked, I’m sure he’d agree it was better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven. When we were caught he seemed almost grateful, but for different reasons from mine. He was happy it had become public knowledge that we were hipster thugs, right down to the robbery’s appearing in the *New York Times*.

Three days after I’d been shot I was finally stabilized and fully conscious. While certainly not for the first time, my parents came to see me, although I have no recollection of their being there before, given that I was in and out of consciousness and likely medicated to the max. I don’t recall a single thing we talked about that day. Whatever it was, I’m certain it was awkward, innocuous chit-chat. I do remember, however, that as soon as they walked into the ICU, my mother handed me a sealed manila envelope. “It’s from Dougie,” she said sternly, none too happy to be delivering something from the boy she likely blamed for my fall from grace. I waited until they left to open it. When I did, I found it contained the main section of the previous Saturday’s *Staten Island Advance*, the edition put out the day after I’d been shot, with a full account of the botched robbery on the front page. A note was attached: “Get well soon. We made the headlines, brother!” To him, we were celebrities. More important, we’d become local heroes to those he believed would truly value what we did. This was the last thing I wanted. At that point I wanted to be someone

else, to hide from the shame and humiliation of being some bargain-rate hoodlum, anyone other than the kid who was shot for holding up a pizza delivery driver for pocket money. We were jerks in my opinion, not Batman and Robin. If anything, we were the bad guys, the Joker and the Riddler. That was good enough for Dougie, to be known for something. It never occurred to me then or when I was doing the robberies to capitalize on it for its "gangster" value or that it was providing me with extraordinariness. To me, it was simpler than that: We decided to rob pizza delivery drivers and that's what we did and what we kept doing, carrying out something we said we'd do.

Of all of the questions I've asked myself about that period in my life, the one I've posed the most often is "Why?" Why did I do it?—as raised in a previous chapter. Honestly, I keep coming back to the same answer over and over again, despite the complex, convoluted answers included in that earlier chapter. It's the same ridiculous, pedestrian one every time: It was something to do. Forget the complicated questions and explanations from the other chapter, the possible 1, 2, 3, and 4 causes of it. Maybe I did it for very mundane and superficial reasons: It was an extreme version of diving into someone's hedges. That may have been one of the characteristics Mess detected in me when he approached us: I would be willing to take on a dare. There was a reckless adventurer's streak in me that possibly would have served me well in different times. I would have been a good pirate, highwayman, or Crusader. Who knows, like the thieves Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh I might have been knighted, dubbed a "Sir." Instead, I felt more like Sir Shithead.

In truth, robbing the delivery drivers was the only serious trouble I was getting into. Okay, that was terrible enough on its own. I wouldn't want to make it seem otherwise, as if lots of fifteen-year-olds rob pizza delivery drivers at water-pistol point. Nevertheless, it was the only activity of mine that could be considered "bad," outside of my not doing my homework and smoking a few joints now and then. Smoking pot wasn't exactly subversive at the time anyway, not in the mid- to late '70s when I was doing it. Everyone seemed to be getting high, even the jocks. Heck, a ring of reefer smoke rose out of the football team's practice huddles. I should know—I played on the JV team, and the so-called straight-and-narrow athletes were in much worse shape than I ever was. Between the heavy binge drinking and the occasional hit or two from a bong, they were heading toward plenty of trouble themselves. I was actually seen as a bit of a nerd on the team, not because of my schooling—I was an indifferent dunce—but because I was shy and reserved compared with most of them,

and booze was never my thing. Actually, measured against most of the kids in my high school, I was a "good kid." While a lousy student, I didn't cause trouble in the classroom, unlike some academic train-wrecks who made life miserable for teachers. Outside of school, I kept to myself. When Stephen Malloy, a buddy from St. Charles and high school, came to the hospital, he told my parents he couldn't believe what had happened. He was stunned to learn that I, of all people, had been involved in a robbery. "David doing that, 'No way,' I said to myself," he told them. "I couldn't even get him to cut a class with me."

Stephen was right. By the standards governing troublemakers, I wasn't one of them. Stephen, on the other hand, certainly was, having been *the* ruling nuisance at St. Charles. He was "busted" in eighth grade for selling pills—"downers" and "uppers." He continued along that path right up until the day they found him dead in Great Kills Park from a heroin overdose soon after his twenty-first birthday. He had enlisted in the Marines when he turned eighteen, two years after he'd run away from home. He ended up riding around the country with some 18-wheeler truck driver who'd picked him up while he was hitchhiking in Pennsylvania. Apparently, joining the Marines hadn't cured what ailed him. It may actually have aggravated it. My parents were aware of his reputation, so I imagine when Stephen bore witness to my moral worth they listened skeptically. But he knew what he was talking about. For the most part, I was a rather well-behaved teen. Tottenville High School was an enormous place—1,200 in my graduating class alone—so it was easy to get lost there. While generally a popular kid, I wasn't tied to any one clique. I wasn't a full-fledged jock, even though I was on the football team. In spite of my mild popularity and playing football for a year, I was still a ghost. I had deliberately made myself into one. I didn't crave the attention. I preferred standing in the shadows, occasionally latching onto other ghosts. I was too timid and fearful of rejection to ask girls on dates. In the four years I was there, I went on only one, and it didn't go very well.

I went on it soon after I was shot. I was still too young to drive, so my sister drove me to the girl's house to pick her up. Like so many Tottenville students, she'd recently moved to the Island from Brooklyn. I spent days fretting over the date and worrying about what to wear. When she answered the door she was wearing super-tight jeans, spiked heels, and a long-sleeved T-shirt that seemed spray painted onto her rather large chest, which until then I hadn't noticed. Her black leather jacket was unzipped and spread wide to display her assets. She looked sexy as all hell, but she also looked like something out of *West Side Story*. I was petrified before

the date began. My sister drove us to the movie theater, where we went to see, of all things, *Death Wish*. Watching Charles Bronson gun down one hoodlum after another made me dizzy, especially when I saw that one of them bore a startling resemblance to me. I practically started hyperventilating. When we walked out of the theater into the well-lit parking lot, my date looked at me and asked what was wrong. "Didn't you like the movie?" she asked in her thick Brooklyn accent, which in time became a Staten Island accent (much lampooned in numerous movies and TV shows). "Sure," I said. I could barely say much more. She took the gum out of her mouth and threw it to the ground. She lit a cigarette and started chattering. "It was great, wasn't it," she said. "I loved it." I hated it. It was one of the most violent movies I'd ever seen. And what kind of girl likes to watch all of that bloodletting? I was as overwhelmed by her as I was by the movie. We walked up to the New Dorp train station to take the train home. My stop was before hers and I got off, without seeing her home. I didn't know I was supposed to escort her home, never having been on a date before. Or maybe I just wanted to get home and crawl into bed. Whatever the reason, my sister was appalled when I told her. "I guess she won't be going out with you again." It was worse than that. When I ran into her the following Monday at school she gave me the finger. I can't say I was terribly disappointed. But I was starting to wonder what my place in the world would be. I was rather inhibited before I got shot, but I was beginning to see that having gone through that and all it meant was making me intolerant of the things others desired and their actions. In the ER, I had swiftly accrued a worldview different from that of many others, especially my peers. I was already skeptical of so-called adult wisdom. I was thinking I could become even more withdrawn, in a sort of unconscious way. Where would that lead me—right back from where I started from, alone, in those empty rooms staring at walls?

But perhaps I would never have ended up in the ER, acquiring that different point of view (that I am so grateful for!), if I had carried out my intention to tell Dougie I wasn't going to attempt another robbery with him. In many ways, I'm glad I didn't have the courage to inform him. My verbal passivity ultimately "saved" me. While Billy drove over to Dougie's, I silently practiced what I would say to him. I made sure Billy waited in the car by telling him Dougie had said his mother didn't like more than one of us waiting in the house for him. I rang the bell. His mother answered. "Dougie, David's here," she hollered in the direction of his upstairs bedroom while letting me through the door. "Be right down," he shouted back. She closed the door behind me. We were standing at the

front door where it met the landing to the upstairs staircase. The sunken living room was to our left. Dougie didn't invite me up, so I couldn't tell him privately in his room. I hoped his mother wouldn't sit in the living room. She didn't. She walked back toward the family room, where I can hear a television show playing, the laugh track coughing up fits of collective amusement every few seconds.

Dougie ambled down the staircase. He was obviously in a good mood. I knew it wouldn't be easy. When I told him, he got angry. At first, he couldn't even look me in the face. Uneasily, he turned his back to me and walked halfway up the staircase. He stopped, turned around, and sat on one of the steps. "C'mon, man, you have to. I want to do this. I can't do it without you." There was more, but I can't remember what else he said. I can recall only the beginning and the end, not the middle. Whatever it was he said, he saw that I was wavering. I was torn between walking out the door and running straight home, and seeing the logic in sticking up another driver. "It'll be the last time," he said. "I promise." I waited until he was finished before replying.

"I need to go back home," I said to Billy as I plopped onto the passenger seat. The rear door slammed shut as Dougie slipped into the back of Billy's green AMC Concord. I was glumly resigned to the robbery, while Dougie's high spirits returned. He patted me on the shoulder. Billy shot me an odd look, as if to say, "What was that all about?" I turned to him as he put the car in gear, the standard shift part of the steering column. "I forgot my wallet," I explained. He rolled his eyes. First I made him wait in the car and then he had to drive me back home for something I forgot. Expecting not to pull off another holdup, I'd left the ski mask and water pistol at home. I had to go back and get them. Billy made a "K" turn in front of Dougie's house and drove the two blocks to mine.

My parents were sitting in the living room watching TV. I told them the same thing—I was back because I'd forgotten my wallet. I said it dejectedly, which I realized might draw too much attention to it. Trying to cover my tracks, I raced upstairs to my bedroom. According to them, I was always rushing around and in a hurry. I needed to act normally. As I grabbed the ski mask and water pistol from their hiding place, I knew I was about to go through something I didn't want to do. Yet I felt trapped in my inability to do the right thing, to simply say, "No!" I was fully aware of this, aware of how my failure to act wisely would lead to a certain kind of action and outcome. My inaction would have enormous consequences. In some ways, I fully knew this as I was pulling the paraphernalia out of the heating vent, although not in its enormity and severity.

The three of us were to meet our other friends at a dirt road closed off to cars. It paralleled the train tracks, and it lay almost in the middle of the Oakwood Heights and New Dorp train stations. Some of us lived in Oakwood and others in New Dorp, so it was a perfect meeting place. It also has several boulders to prevent cars from driving through, including police cruisers. It was therefore an ideal spot to go and safely drink beers or cheap wine, like Boone's Farm Apple Wine, and smoke a little weed. Back then, getting high was cheap. From a typical nickel (\$5) bag of weed a dozen joints could be rolled. If five of us kicked in a dollar apiece we had enough pot for the weekend, including a possible left-over joint or two for Sunday. No matter where we were going, we'd meet at "The Rock," which is what the location was called. We sometimes hung out there all weekend if we didn't feel like dealing with the more aggressive posers at The Station. Few of us had enough money to purchase a 75-cent movie ticket or much of anything else. Hanging out at The Rock was more entertaining than most movies anyway. We told silly stories, made fun of each other, and goofed around. I was generally known for telling the funniest stories and engaging in the sharpest and wittiest "color commentary" when others were telling theirs. The Rock was like a nightclub, and other kids would come by to hang out with us, knowing we were a harmless, amusing bunch who didn't mind sharing a joint or a beer with them. The Rock was "ours," among my close-knit friends, a group I'd grown close to starting in the seventh grade when Dougie introduced me to them. The Rock also was a more sedate place to be than The Station, which was becoming overrun with uptight goons and thugs. We must have met at The Rock hundreds of times during the four years I was palling around with that crowd.

When we arrived, most of our friends were already there, wondering what had taken us so long. We were responsible for picking up the beer, so their concerns weren't only altruistic. As the time approached to call the pizza parlor, Dougie and I agreed we'd tell them we had promised to help his parents serve drinks during a party they were throwing. His parents were always having parties. His dad elaborately re-did their basement for them, including a wrap-around bar, ceiling dimmers, and a restored fireplace. We had The Rock and the adults had their party rooms. It wasn't a stretch, then, to use "playing bartenders" as a reason to leave earlier than usual.

Before we went to The Rock we had stopped at a deli in New Dorp to buy the beer. The drinking age at the time was eighteen. I'd always looked older than my age, and I'd been buying beer since I was thirteen.

I also think the times were more relaxed, and most people selling liquor seemed indifferent to following the letter of the law. Billy was eighteen, but I didn't need him to buy the beer. I walked into the deli alone and bought it.

When I walked out of the store toward Billy's car, parked a few yards away, a cop car drove alongside of me. The driver's partner looked me up and down, and as he did our eyes met. I could read his easily enough: "Guilty!" His window was rolled halfway down so he was able to get a decent look at me. He could see that while I may have had the face of a young man I had the body of someone barely past puberty. It was evident the brown paper bag I was cradling in my arms held a couple of six-packs, which could be purchased back then for merely a dollar apiece. He turned to the driver and said something as they passed. The car abruptly stopped; it rolled slowly backward. He cranked the window fully down. I pretended I hadn't noticed anything. I walked faster along the sidewalk, past where the patrol car had come to a standstill.

"You," he said, "come over here." I walked over to the car but tried not to get too close, hoping he'd be unable to see how young I was.

"I said come over here." I moved a little closer. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen, officer. Why?"

He stared at my face. He again took full stock of me, eyeing me from head to toe. "Bullshit!" he blurted out finally. "I'm not even going to bother asking you for ID. How'd you get that beer?"

I panicked. Instead of getting the store owner, a complete stranger, in trouble for selling it to me illegally, I told the cop that my friend had bought it for me. Billy and Dougie were leaning against the driver's side of his car smoking cigarettes. "Where's your friend?" he asked. "Over there," I said, gesturing toward them and passing up another chance not to get Billy involved. I easily could have said my friend had just left, or something like that, but I was too nervous to be furtive. I couldn't help but be factual. "He's standing over there," I added. Both cops turned toward them. "Which one is he?" the driver asked. "The taller one," I said. "Hey you!" he shouted, throwing his head in Billy's direction. "Get over here." Billy pointed at himself with a questioning look. "Yeah, you," the cop said. "Get over here, now."

Billy was not afraid of the cops. If anything, he was insolent toward them. He had a sharp, sarcastic tongue whenever they confronted us and chased us out of places for "loitering" or for "trespassing." He was once arrested outside the Farrell High School gym for "insolence" during one of their routine Friday Night Dances. When a cop car pulled up to the

gymnasium doors, its driver asked why we were there and not inside like the other kids. "None of your damn business," Billy replied. From there it escalated to Billy's daring the "pigs" to arrest him. They took him up on it. As he walked over to the car outside of the deli, I was hoping he would keep his cool.

"Did you buy this for him?" the cop asked. Billy looked at the bag and then at me. He was simultaneously stunned and exasperated I'd been so rash. I returned his expression with one of my own acknowledging how stupid I'd been and that I already regretted it. All of this likely had a calming effect on him. He seemed resigned to the situation.

"Yeah, sure," he said.

"Let's see some ID." The driver handed Billy's license to his partner, then warned Billy about buying beer for underage kids. Billy was lucky they didn't arrest him and haul his butt to the police station.

"I bet a night in jail would cure you," the driver said.

"No, sir."

"What?"

"I mean, no, sir, there's no need for that. I'm already cured. It'll never happen again."

"Yeah, well, it better not. Give me that," the cop said, looking at the bag filled with beer. I handed it to him through the window.

As this exchange was taking place, the other cop was taking Billy's information off his license. They took my name and address as well.

Later that night, I lay on the wet grass bleeding nearly to death. Once the cops found out my name, a little detective work revealed I'd been stopped earlier by a patrol car. Another name popped up on their radar. In the middle of the night, Billy was arrested for being my accomplice.

Like mine, Billy's dad was a cop, but they arrested him anyway. His father worked in Brooklyn and there was some tension and antagonism between interborough units, largely because cops in the other, more "active" boroughs considered Staten Island cops on "paid vacation." The Staten Island cops knew they were viewed contemptuously, so maybe they took Billy in to irritate a Brooklyn cop. At the station, Billy's dad was told the details of the robbery. His father said it was impossible for Billy to have been involved. Sure, his dopey son had bought beer for the kid who'd been shot earlier in the night, but that didn't automatically mean they'd been together during the robbery. More to the point, I'd been shot before midnight and Billy had been home for almost a half an hour before then. Billy typically stayed out late, much later than when I had to be home, but he'd gotten bored with being at The Rock and was home

sometime after 11:30. His father was his alibi. He was watching Johnny Carson's monologue when Billy walked through the door. He was still arrested. Not until the next morning was he finally released from the New Dorp police precinct's cell.

It didn't occur to me that Billy would be dragged into the situation. After I told the cops my name and moments before I passed out, a uniformed officer walked back from a patrol car and said something to the good Brobdingnagian.

"Were you with Billy Drigun?" he asked.

Drigun? Where'd they come up with that? Then I remembered what had happened outside the deli. They thought he was the one. "No," I said as emphatically as I could.

I felt the presence of the bad Brobdingnagian moving closer. The guy seemed to exude anger and disgust. When I told my dad about him, he wanted to find out who it was and reprimand him, perhaps even confront the guy. I begged him not to. As much as the son of a bitch overreacted, I guess I felt as though he'd thought he was doing his job. To him, I was just some punk who'd been robbing pizza delivery drivers. And he was right. That's exactly who I was. If I hadn't been, I wouldn't have been in that situation, lying on the wet grass with three bullet wounds, giving someone like him the opportunity to play his part in it.

"C'mon, stay with us," said the good Brobdingnagian. I must have been fading, slurring the few words I spoke. "William R. Drigun. That's who you were with, right?"

"No," I repeated, but I could barely marshal enough energy to get that one word out. "No, I swear."

The bad Brobdingnagian stepped even closer. "Don't," the other said. "Look, we know you were with him, so why don't you just tell us."

"I wasn't with him," I said, with as much conviction as I could generate. I also wanted to perpetuate the fiction that I'd acted alone. "I wasn't with anyone," I added.

"This fucking kid is asking for it," the bad Brobdingnagian said, kicking me again. The good one didn't stop him. "Maybe so," he said. How hard I'm kicked and where I haven't a clue. I feel nothing, just as I felt nothing when he'd dug his shoe into my injured shoulder and kicked me once before. Suddenly, I'm shrinking, sinking into an expanding, soundless hole growing below me. I'm sucked into it, and I'm too worn out to wonder if I'll resurface or come out of the other end.