Family

It seems to me that the kind of neighborhood you come up in may make all the difference in which way you go and where you end up. There was a lot of people in my neighborhood that didn't do much work and there was a lot of people who did, but the majority didn't. Hustling was their thing: number running, bootlegging, selling narcotics, selling stolen goods, prostitution. There's so many things that go on—it's a whole system that operates inside itself. Say I was to take you by it. You want some junk, then I would take you to the dude that handles drugs. You want some clothes, I could take you somewhere that handles that. You want some liquor, I could take you someplace other than a liquor store. Of course, it's all outside the law.

That's how it was. Somebody was always doing something in each family. If it wasn't the adults, say the mother or father, then it was the son or daughter. I was sticking up; one of my brothers was stealing; one of my sisters was bootlegging; one of my uncles wrote numbers; one of my grandmothers occasionally wrote numbers; and my grandfather bootlegged.

My grandfather, though, worked on the same job for about thirty years, and I couldn't dig that at all. His main money came from bootlegging, but I think he had the job because he thought long-range. He knew they don't give
thing was pretty wild. The kids, we ran wild, and the adults were wild. It would be nothing for us to be on the front steps playing hide-and-seek and all of a sudden you hear bang, bang, bang, and people are shooting at each other in the street. And everybody ducking and hiding. This was normal. Eventually you'd be taking all this in. It's just a way of survival.

In Southwest everybody did the same thing, and it was a struggle just to get along. Some had a little bit more than others, some a little bit less. It was a close neighborhood, though—most people had been there for a long time. Everybody knew everybody's kid, everybody's dog. There was quite a few people who had come up from the South, but most had been born in Washington, like my parents and grandparents.

We lived the longest in Southwest on G Street. The houses were right on the sidewalk with no front yards but a lot of big old overgrown trees sitting right by the curb. We did have a large backyard, and behind it was a horse stable. Then there was a little frame house, which was almost like part of the stable only people lived there. There were three houses with airways between them next to that and then a big gray apartment building on the corner.

On the other side of the street was a place we used to call the barracks. Evidently it was an old army barracks that had been converted into a living area; people lived all through it. We used to walk up and down the wooden steps and look over the railings and play cowboy there. Then there was an alley. All our alleys had hip names—Brown's Court, Dixon's Court, Smoke Alley. But wouldn't nobody go through the alleys at night because of the rats. You could even see them in the daytime. They function just like people did, and I used to chase them, throwing rocks and then running away from them.

On the corner was a little Japanese store. You could take
at the end of the week he would get his money. Most people
paid on time like they supposed to. I guess it was just a little
pact they had formed among themselves in the neighbor-
hood, 'cause at the end of the week everybody went there,
bought the rest of their groceries, and paid their bill.

Now, I had a thing where I used to cop the store book
and go over there and cop me some candy. Then my mother
say, "Where did this extra twenty-five cents come from?"
She always knew about her money all the way to the penny.
Even though the man in the store knew what I'd be doing,
he'd always ask, "Your mother know that you're getting
this?" And I say, "Uh-hum." He knew, but it was an extra
quarter for him.

In Southwest, when I was ten or eleven, there were stores
on just about every corner—Jew stores, Chinese stores,
Japanese stores, black stores. Most of the owners lived over
their stores, so robbery didn't keep them from doing busi-
ness. On Fridays and Saturdays everybody be paying their
bills, and of course, the store owners were extra careful on
those days. A lot of them had particular kinds of reputations
—people used to recognize them just like they recognize my
family for being the bootleggers of the block. The store
owner was the man you could go to during the week when
you didn't have any cash and get grub on the store book.
People respected that. In the event that they was robbed or
stuck up, most of the people in the neighborhood would be
sympathetic to them. Very seldom anybody in the neigh-
borhood would rob a store that was in the neighborhood,
because store owners knew everybody and everybody's
children.

The numbers writers, the bootleggers, the gamblers, the
pimps, and the prostitutes—in that neighborhood, I knew
them all and they knew me. I used to go to the store to pick
up little things that the prostitutes wanted. There was a big
numbers man named James, and for a long time I dug his
cool. I dug his manner, his nonchalant way of dealing with
people. I always felt like he was a real big shot. He was about
the biggest because everybody respected him, he always had
plenty of money, he always dressed nice, and everybody
always done what he wanted them to do. I dug the respect
that he gave and that he got, and the orders that he gave
were immediately carried out.

Another dude, Sherman, was nice-looking—a typical
pimp. Dark-skinned, well-groomed, well-dressed, tone sharp
as a razor when it come to saying something to a woman.
It impressed me the way all the women went for him, be-
cause Sherman was the type of pimp that didn't have to go
solicit broads. They came to him, and this was an advantage
he always had. James and Sherman, these were the people
that got a lot of respect in the neighborhood.

As for white people, I never had much contact with
them at all, except the insurance man. My grandfather was
a great believer in insurance. No doubt he had life insurance
on just about all of us. The white insurance man gave me
fifty cents one day, when I was four or five, and that's when
somebody first said something about black and white. And
I didn't understand. As far as whites living in the neigh-
borhood or coming in regular, that didn't happen. I seen white
people sometimes when my mother took me downtown to
buy shoes or clothes, but I seen very few white people oth-
erwise. Not at school, not on the playground, nowhere.

When I was in kindergarten or first grade, I went to
Smallwood School around the corner. On the next block
was another school—S.J. Bourne. Originally S.J. Bourne
was an all-white school, 'cause during that time, integration
wasn't in. Must have been in '48 they moved all the white
kids out and moved us in, and they condemned Smallwood.
We used to play in it, though, even after they boarded it up.

There was a library several blocks away that would
show little movies, cartoons, and always there used to be
somebody reading stories. That person would always be
white. So I thought that white people was real smart,'cause
everybody sitting down there listening and they reading. Can't nobody else read but them, and they was telling some hip stories. So I put them ahead of myself mentally because it seemed white people had accomplished more. They knew more. Occasionally when I ran into somebody white around my age, I always found that they could read better, spell better, and everything else, and I resented that. When I was seven or eight, I began to be more aware of words, and that's when prejudice started seeping in. Whites calling blacks "nigger" and blacks calling whites "redneck." That's how you begin to break people down into this category or that.

My family has always been close. I've got five sisters and three brothers, but I'm the oldest. So most of my younger days either they were real small or weren't even born. My sister Cookie comes next in age to me. Coming up together when we were kids, I really didn't like Cookie. Not at all. I used to do a lot of unkind things to her, but I'm glad that she grew up and didn't remember or didn't choose to hold it against me, because now I really love her.

My father never lived at home, but my mother, well, me and her were really tight. My whole family life was good to me as far as feeling for one another—like, I love my mother, I love my grandmother and grandfather, my sisters and brothers. I always felt that they felt the same way about me. They have shown me in many ways just how much they have cared, because I wasn't exactly what you'd call the best son on the block, you know.

My grandmother and my grandfather—my mother's parents—they were kind of brought up on the hustling life—they've been into all different things, but my mother was always kind of a square—she never really did anything. Still, I think she understood why I was kind of wild. I never disrespect her. That's one of the things that kind of bothers me now when sometimes one of my younger brothers or sisters will say something to my mother. I never did say nothing smart to her, out of respect and sometimes out of fear that she would get right on my case.

The main thing with my mother was worrying about me. Like, by the time I was ten, I used to stay away from home maybe two or three days—all night—and she not knowing what I was doing. Usually she just assumed that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, it was wrong, and so she worried quite a bit. But Moms never really got on me too much about any of the things I did. She always told me, "My son, whatever you do, you're my son." When I was younger, she used to threaten me with "Just keep on getting in trouble, boy. I'm not going down there to get you out." Then as soon as I got busted, here she come. I kind of knew it, and I think I used to take advantage of her a lot because I knew she would come.

Most of the time when I was coming up my mother had different little jobs. Exactly what she was doing, I knew it wasn't nothing professional. She'd do housecleaning or what they'd call day's work, going to different people's houses on different days—in another neighborhood, of course—and cleaning their house for them and getting paid. Similar to the old thing about black folk working in the kitchen. I remember her working in a restaurant as a waitress, and I remember her working at a college in the cafeteria. I guess I must have been around ten or eleven during that time, and I stayed on the streets so much that I never really had a whole lot of time for her. But she always was around if something happened. If I got picked up by the police or thrown out of school, she always would be on the scene.

Mostly I think my mother wanted me to have some hopes that I would be something other than what I ended up being. She was always thinking about us kids and doing without. I recall an occasion when I told her it would be all right if she didn't get me something for Christmas or Easter. I didn't present her with a lot of problems as far as buying things for me, because I usually got things for myself. On
a lot of occasions, I got things not only for myself but for her and my younger sisters and brothers as well.

I never did talk to my family too much about what I was doing in school or on the streets. My mother would sometimes make mention of how was I doing in school and how I better stay out of trouble. So would my grandfather, but I wouldn't talk much because a lot of the time I hadn't been to school in a week or so. She never would know, and I'd make up some kind of lie.

I never really knew my father until I got older, but I think he kind of swept Moms off her feet at a young age, 'cause he was a flashy dude, a hustler, a musician. He played quite a few instruments, but his main instrument was bongos. He could also play the guitar, piano, and saxophone. From what my mother and them told me, he had the reputation at one time of being the best dancer in Washington, D.C.

I was like so many of my children—a love child. In later years, after I got a little older, him and I really grew kind of close. We got real tight. Just about the time he died, when I was twenty-three, we was really doing a lot of things together. I never disliked him even though he never really done anything for me as a child or later on, like helping me, buying clothes or shoes, stuff like that. It was Moms's job. He never did, at no time. He went his own way and Moms went hers, but I always respected him as my father.

My brother Leonard is probably the most like me in the family. His nickname is Nicey, but I calls him Nut. After a while he was beginning to do most of the things I had done. I would never try to discourage him, because I don't feel like preaching to what people feel they want to do. Knowing my brother and knowing how much he was like me, it wouldn't have done any good anyway. The few times I did try to discourage him, he would say, "Man, when you was such and such an age, you did such and such a thing." What could I say? Because I had.

Stickup—armed robbery—was my thing, and I could do that very well. After Nut got a certain age, he begin to start sticking up people. I said, "This is what you want to do, this is what you're gonna do, then you might as well know the right way." So he did a few things with me in later years, since around '69. I guess he's about seven years younger than me, a real quiet dude but very dangerous, and I knew it 'cause I used to be kind of quiet myself for a long time. One time if I had to set a dude straight, there wouldn't be no words. I'd just hit him in the mouth and set him straight. And that's the way Nut is—real quiet. Whatever I was telling him, he was listening, especially if it was something about sticking up somebody. He learned pretty well while he was in that particular bag. When I started getting into drugs, he was at the Youth Center. By the time he came out, I was rolling kind of big, so I made him one of my lieutenants immediately.

Now another relative, Henry, he was a different story from my brother Nut and me. Everybody who know us always said, "Johnny and Nicey, something wrong with them, they're crazy. But Henry, he's such a good boy." But people don't know that Henry was using heroin before me and Nicey ever was. But it lasted only a short while. Then he turned to the church, and it worked out pretty good. I haven't been to church lately, but they tell me he preach a pretty good sermon.

I asked him about going to the church, 'cause I was really curious. I said, "Man, like what happened? What made you get out of this bag?" This was before I found out that he actually used drugs. And he said, "Man, I couldn't afford it. You and Nicey been in jail enough for everybody in the family. So I know I didn't need to go. I just didn't have no income. You know I ain't gonna take no pistol and stick nobody up. I can't steal, so I turned to the Lord." So I say, "Solid."

Well, he got himself together, and I was glad of that. He
always in church. He just try to do everything within the system as much as possible. But he still a lot of fun to be around. When he's with me, we smoke and drink wine—he just a regular dude. But he knew that with a heroin habit, he'd eventually have to do the sticking up and robbing things, and he also knew he didn't know how to do them correctly. He knew that he would jeopardize himself as far as going to jail, and that was what he really didn't want to do—go to jail. So he just stopped. And I was kind of glad, kind of proud.

My youngest brother, Mo, during the time I was coming up was pretty young or even unborn—he's only sixteen now, so I'm twice as old. Out of all of us Mo is the tallest and also the darkest. He's pretty witty in his own way, even at the age of sixteen. Right now he helps me quite a bit around the house when I can catch up with him. They tell me that he's a pretty good athlete—football and basketball. I'm glad of that. One of his problems is he go to school, but he don't try hard enough. Another one of his problems is that he thinks being a tough guy really means something. Mo being my baby brother, I told him about the affection I have for him and the love that I have for him. But I also told him in a very nice way that if he ever got in any trouble or caused Moms as much trouble as Nicey or I caused her, then he would have to deal with me. He would find that even though I'm confined to a wheelchair, I am still the man that I've always been, and I plan to always be the man that I've always been. In simple words I told him, "Don't get into any trouble. I wouldn't like it at all. If you get into any trouble, then I will personally put my foot in your ass."

What I really want for Mo is for him to continue with sports and maybe get a scholarship and try to be something other than what his brother is: ex-convict criminal type confined to two jails—one the District jail and the other a wheelchair jail. I don't want any of my brothers or sisters or kids to go through what I went through.

**First Conviction**

The first time I got into really serious trouble was when I was seven or eight. When I was young I always liked to hang with an older crowd 'cause I figured that I could learn more from them. Kids my age, they didn't want to do the things I wanted. Nobody eight wanted to duck school: "I don't wanna duck no school." But the dude ten or eleven, he would go with me in a minute: "Let's go steal something." It wasn't that the younger kids wanted to go to school; they was just afraid of their parents. I should've been afraid myself because my mother caught me one time a block away from school and like to beat me to death about this school thing.

At that time, I had a friend named Freddie, an older dude about thirteen or fourteen who lived across the street from me. Freddie was a loner. His family treated him like dirt. His mother had remarried, and his stepfather dealt with him like a dog. I'm sure what made me like him was that Freddie was an underdog, and I have always been the guy that's for the underdog. Even at that early age. Maybe because I had always been an underdog myself. I used to hear the grown people talking about how his stepfather beat him, and I used to see Freddie a lot of times going to or from the store or sitting on his front porch, looking sad. So I just decided to make him my friend.

Freddie was average size for his age, but I believe he was
pretty tough. He could hold his own out there on the street. He wasn't too much like me because a lot of things I used to start. He never started much, but he sure could finish a lot of things. He was shy around girls because he didn't think girls liked him, and he'd be shy when he was over at my house.

I remember the time we met. Freddie was sitting on his step out front, and I'm comin' down the street with a big old bag of candy I'd stolen. I seen him sitting there looking all sad, so I ask him if he wants some candy. You know how older people be talking: "It's a damn shame the way people treat that kid." This what made me approach him in the first place. He always called me a funny little guy—I guess 'cause I was so small. Then he start things, like when I'd get in little fights he would take up for me, 'cause I never had a big brother—I was the big brother. By him being four or five years older, he knew much more than I did, and he would show me things that would really be amazing to me—easier ways to steal, better ways to operate.

I think the first big thing that we done together was a junk shop. There was one of them junk shop trucks that was loaded with them big bales of paper. There's a whole lot of bales on the truck, but this one particular bale was nothing but comic books. Him and I are messing around on the truck, walking around on the top of the bales, and we discovered the comic books. So what we do, we take those comic books, all we can carry. We go back around the corner where everybody at, let them know, and then everybody come back. Meanwhile me and Freddie we sitting there laughing at them, 'cause they falling off the truck, comic books sliding everywhere, but at the same time we were thinking the same thing: Gee, all these comic books outside, and the junkyard is closed. Wonder what's inside. Probably something a little better.

So we just laid and laid and wait. Finally the police came, and all the kids scattered, but me and Freddie end up back at the junk shop. We got in over this little jive fence. Now they have some dogs. Junkyard dogs is just like that dude Jim Croce sing about—that's exactly how the junkyard dogs are, mean dogs. But even though I get real scared, Freddie had a way with animals. I ask him, "What you carrying that bag for?" He says, "That's for the dogs." And I don't think it was no meat, but it might have been bread or something. So now the dogs are walking around with us real friendly. So we looking for what we gonna take, and we destroy a few things—naturally we always gotta destroy something. Just imagine two young dudes in a junk shop who can do anything they want. They can take anything that they are strong enough or able enough to carry away from there. They can break up what they want. I think I was kind of proud of myself for breaking into that junk shop—succeeding. I really had the feeling then that I was going to get away with what I was doing. So we destroyed things and took a lot of junk—flashlights, telephones. In fact, that's how we got a telephone—one that you plug in the wall, that you can dial out, but can't nobody dial in. A real old-style phone.

Freddie and I did quite a few things other than break into junk shops. One of the big deals with me when I was very young was the little prizes that started coming in cereal boxes. Little whistles or little men. You buy a box of cereal, and you get a deep-sea diver or something like that. I used to mess up boxes and boxes of different kinds of cereals in the Safeways or Giants or A & P's. Just go in the store, go round to the cereal counter and be careful that nobody could see me, then open up a box of cereal, stick my hand down there, and get the prize out. I might do that to three or four boxes every day.

During the summer we used to have a lot of street showers—open up the fire hydrants. We was really into that. One time Freddie had on some short pants and a little shirt. I seen his back. Looked like somebody'd put one of them bull whips on it. So I asked him what happened, and he told me his father had beat him with an ironing cord, a stripped-down ironing cord. Freddie said, "I ain't going for it no
more.” His mother had attempted to stop his father from beating him, and she got hurt too. Now, Freddie always had the idea of getting enough money or stealing something valuable enough so he and his mother could leave this dude. But it never came to pass. Finally Freddie told me he was going to run away. So I said, “You my friend. You’re running away, I’m gonna run away.” Of course, it didn’t take much for me to want to run away. Whenever my mother threatened me with a whipping, I wanted to do it.

Now, at that time a dude we called Skeeter was also one of my good friends. Any time he felt like running away, I ran away with him, because any time I wanted to run away, he ran away. We talked about or planned to run to a different place each time, though we didn’t always run away every time we said we were going to. New York—that always was the place. Why New York? I don’t know. This was just one of the things you’d be saying. But running away as a kid, even though I did a lot of it, never got me very far. Run away for a couple hours, then get hungry, and run home faster than you ran away.

So Freddie and me decided we was gonna run away. We walking around up on 4th Street, and it’s getting late and chilly, and I’m getting scared. We had no money, no nothing, so there was just this little coffee joint, a little restaurant called Eggs and R. I don’t know what that meant, but I know there was a government building right across the street from it, and all the government workers coming to get coffee and donuts. The joint wasn’t very high, even less than one story, so we decided that’s where we wanted to be, inside Eggs and R.

We got a big oil drum and put it up against the wall, and Freddie climbed right off the can and up onto the roof. But I was much shorter, so when I could finally hustle up on the can, I really gotta scramble to get onto that roof and him pulling me up. Now, we used to play in this place called the chute-the-chute, which was just a big round thing where they send flour or sugar down. So when I see the big old ventilator thing up on the roof, that reminds me of the chute-the-chute. So I say to Freddie, “This is the best way you can go in—down through there.” Freddie say, “Well, let me go first in case the fan might be on.” So he slides down. And it’s over top of an old grille, and he kicked it on in. So I slid on down. We got in there, and we had a natural ball.

I guess it was about one or two in the morning when we first got in. The police checked it two times while we was in there. Just come and try the door, shine the light over, then walk away. Get back in the scout car.

First place I headed for was the pie rack. Lemon meringue pie and coconut custard—that is my favorite. So I immediately goes there. Freddie all bent down over this big old thing of ice cream, with hands digging in it, but it’s so hard, he can’t dig in with his hands. So he’s looking around for something to dig into it with. I got pie and I’m laughing and I’m eating and finally taking the pies and passing it in my face, and we having a ball. There’s a few lunch meats in the boxes and we eating meat, grab a big handful of baloney, and we talking and finally we playing and we throwing stuff on each other, shaking up sodas—chhssssshh! So we really wrecking this joint. We sat down at one point for a rest ’cause I was full and he was full, and he was saying, “Man, I ain’t eat that much in all my life.”

We came across some cigarettes, and by then I was smoking anyway. I smoked Camels. So we bagged up all the cigarettes. We’re gonna carry them with us. Then we run across the cigars. Say, “Now we’re gonna try a cigar.” Freddie’s telling me how to smoke it, this big old ceegar. “You gotta keep on puffing.” He puts a match to it, and I’m getting dizzier and dizzier. Hoo-hoo. I say, “Man, I don’t like cigars.” So finally I mash it out, and he got one hanging out his mouth, unlit.

And it’s beginning to get a little light out. You can tell daybreak is about to start. The second time the police come
by, they looked in, and I was really surprised, 'cause we had messed the joint up with ice cream and stuff all over the walls and windows, and they just shine the light, tried the door, made sure the two front windows wasn't broken, and that was it. So Freddie and I figured it was pretty safe—we had kind of clocked it the first time they came; this was the second time they came, and we figured they won't be back for such and such a time. What we didn't think was that the man was coming in. We didn't think that the place had to open up for business.

When we first see the man, he was talking to someone and getting ready to open the door. At the time I was directly under the spot where we had came in. We peeped over the counter and saw him as he was getting ready to put the key in the door. So then we was trying to get out. He put the key in the door, but he continued to talk. This gave me time to climb back up on the grille. The way we had it planned was Freddie would push me up there, then I'd reach back down and help him up, 'cause it's much harder going up—real slippery and you got to hold on to the sides—it's kind of narrow in spots and then widening up in other spots.

I finally make it. Then I hear the man holler, "Hey, what the hell you doing? Watcha doing?" And I can hear Freddie inside the chute kicking, phoom, phoom, phoom, trying to get up. I'm looking back down in there, and I can see shadows a few feet down, but I can't hardly see him. I'm saying, "Come on, Freddie. Come on, Freddie." You could hear him inside the thing, making a lot of noise, trying to get up there. Evidently the man ran in and grabbed him. And once he grabbed him, then Freddie trying to kick him, and at one point Freddie got to where he just touched my fingers. Touched, barely touched. I'm still reaching down, and Freddie say, "Run, Johnny Boy, run. Go home, go home," just like that, and sunk back down. And when his hand disappeared I jumped off the roof. I thought I had broke my leg. I didn't wait for the cans; I just jumped off the roof and went home.

Soon afterwards my mother asked me where I had been. Of course I lied and said I was here doing this and that, none of which she believed anyway. It must have been some time in the afternoon when it hit the neighborhood that Freddie was dead. I kept saying the man killed him. But they said Freddie was born with a heart condition. So I think the fear was just too much for him. Still, right to the end he was thinking about me, telling me to get away. That's what I remember most.

I don't think I accepted what happened—I didn't look at it like Freddie being dead. I looked at it like I would never see him again. I felt real bad. Freddie was the first friend I lost, and I was only friends with him for about a year before he died.

In the meantime my mother put two and two together. So I finally told her the truth. Anyway, everybody in the neighborhood knew it was me. My mother called one of my uncles and told him that she wanted him to take me down country, somewhere in North or South Carolina. And my uncle say, "Yeah, well, I'll take him down there after I get off work." But just like everybody in the neighborhood, the police figured it out too. Before my uncle got off work, the police had got there. And that's how it all began.

I had to go to juvenile court in front of the judge, and I remember the judge talking mostly to my mother and not me, and I remember not understanding what was happening at all. Aside from the fact that they kept saying something must be done—"A kid at an early age involved with such things, and plus he been picked up this number of times before." So the next thing I know, I was in Junior Village.

We didn't have any fences or guards or stuff like that at Junior Village—it was just cottages. A certain number of kids stayed in one cottage, and each cottage had a counselor in the daytime, evening, and nighttime—round-the-clock
counseling—who never did too much but sit around and make sure there wasn't nothing else happening. But anybody could have walked away any time they wanted to.

Even without the fences we didn't have a whole lot of freedom. We did everything on a time schedule. We ate by a time schedule. We did our little chores for that day by a time schedule. We had recreation by a time schedule. Most of them joints like Junior Village they run like jail—a lot of people think of it as jail and of the counselors as guards. I myself think of it as a stage of jail.

At Junior Village most of the day from about 9 to 2 or 3 was spent in school. The main subjects was reading, spelling, and math, because they ain't nobody know how to do that! There was a lot of people that could draw, but nobody could read. We had to go to that school, but to me it was only one teacher that really wanted to help. I think we kind of discouraged her—me and the little dudes that was there with me. You know how somebody's just too nice to work in a certain place? I wish I could remember her name, but I can't. She tried to help us a lot. But we really didn't accept the help that she was trying to give us.

My family didn't like the fact that I was in Junior Village at all. So my mother and my grandparents did their best to get me sent back home and not sent to reform school. My mother used to threaten me a lot about “farm schools.” Instead of “reform school,” it was the “farmer school.” “Boy, you keep on acting up, and you going to the farmer school!”

My mother always came to see me on visiting days. But my grandmother never could stand to see me locked up. I remember when I was first at the District jail, my grandmother came to see me one time. All of them times I have been in jail, she came to see me just that one time; and it hurt her so bad to see me in the tank and talking on the phone; she couldn't touch or hold me, nor could I touch or hold her. She never did ever come back to that District jail to see me—not out of all the times I've been there. When I was at

Junior Village it was the same thing. My grandfather or my mother used to come and bring my sister Cookie, but never my grandmother.

I learned a lot of things at Junior Village—mostly more bad than good. Kids from all over town were sent to Junior Village. It was a tough little place; it was a place where you fought almost every day because everybody trying to be tougher than the next person. Before I got to the place, I knew all about it—what you supposed to do, how you supposed to act. That was the advantage I had hanging around with older kids. So the first thing I did upon getting there and getting assigned to a cottage was to see who had the biggest mouth, who was making the most noise, and I proceeded to hit him right in his mouth. Fortunately he wasn't very much bigger than me. He was kind of head of the cottage, and I was showing the others “I'm not gonna take no shit off none of y'all, and I'm not even gonna take none from him cause he all y'all's boss. And I'm gonna show him right now.” So you just walk right in and fight, two or three times a day, and then you'd wake up the next morning and fight some more.

I also learned how to shoot crap pretty good. I'm not really much of a gambler, but I know how to cheat. I probably couldn't do it real well, but if I'm playing with an amateur, I could cheat on him. I learned the right way to go about housebreaking, the right way to get away from the truant officers, the right way to steal from the Safeway. And I learned about drop-pockets. You make a small tear in the lining of your coat, big enough for whatever you want to put in there; then you steal cigarettes. You take a couple of packs at a time and put it in there and shake it all down.

My fighting became much better because I did it more often. Lying. I used to lie, but before then I wasn't no expert at lying. I became an expert liar. I learned how to hot-wire cars right there in the place—on the superintendent's car. I learned to drive a little bit—I never got the opportunity
actually to drive, people just described what was the brake, what was the clutch, what was the gear. So you take all of this in because this is knowledge that would be useful to you later on. And it was, now that I think about it. There was more older dudes that I hung around with, and naturally they had more to tell you. I really got into it my first time down.

Very few people that go into a juvenile joint come out with the feeling that “I'm not going back.” They know they're going to end up back in a place like Junior Village, because they know the things that got them there in the first place, and they aren't going to stop doing them. Everybody know in the long run you are going to get caught again. If you continued to steal or hook school, then you're coming back. A lot of kids that did come back was kids of abandoned families—no father or mother. They came back more often than guys like myself that stole or hooked school. The people that didn't come back were people whose house had caught on fire or something like that, and they were just at Junior Village till their parents found another place. They hardly ever came back.

A lot of kids would come out and would tell about how much fun they had at Junior Village. They had a nice place to sleep, they was around people their age, and they ate good—what they considered good: it was better than what they was getting at home, and they was getting this three times a day! If they got a meal at home once a day, that was hip.

What I liked the best about Junior Village was scrapple and syrup and biscuits at breakfast time. But even though some of my friends really liked Junior Village and didn't ever want to leave, didn't ever want to grow up, I just viewed it as being locked up and being unable to do what I wanted to do. I didn't like getting paddled or switched or hit with a belt, but what I really couldn't stand was getting restricted—not being able to go to a movie or somewhere I wanted to go. That used to worry me more than a whupping did.

I never really thought I belonged at Junior Village because they didn't really what you call “catch me in the act.” After talking to some of the older guys, I figured they needed more proof to send me there. And I think I was homesick. I don't care where you live or what you come from or what you do: if you be away from it long enough, you often get homesick.

That's one of the reasons I used to run away so much. It really wasn't no problem getting out of Junior Village. A lot of times we'd be lined up going to the dining room to eat and just break out running. There was a little pathway that led right up into the heart of Southeast, and that was our road to getting away. Most of the time anybody ran, that's where they'd run—straight up that hill. So they kind of watched that hill. It depends on who you was when you ran away. If I ran away by myself, some of the older kids would catch me and bring me back. But if I ran away with my friend Tony, who was older than myself and had a pretty tough reputation, then it was all right—ain't nobody try to catch us. So we just ran.

Tony always seemed to have some place to go. But this place to go really was nowhere. Hanging around, sleeping in apartment basements or old houses. Him and I ran away so much that I got tired of running away with him. Say you'd run away and you'd be walking the streets; the police would pick you up if they'd see you were not in school, and they'd ask you about school or where you live, and you take your time telling them or stutter or don't say nothing—then they take you in. Eventually they would find out that you were from Junior Village and return you. I went home a couple of times, but of course my mother took me back—doing the right thing. She never would let me stay at home. So even though I went home once or twice, afterwards I wouldn't go home no more.

The problem was there wasn't really anybody at Junior Village I could talk to. There would always be somebody saying, “You shouldn't do this” or “You shouldn't do that.”
After a while you just don't want to hear it. But as far as getting into a person and setting a dude down and rapping to him, ain't nobody really do that. What most of us needed at that time was some individual attention to let us know that somebody did care. There was nobody sitting there trying to be your friend and trying to ask you what were your reasons for doing this. Then if you feel you have got a good reason for doing whatever you did, then try to understand it. They tell me things are much better today in them little juvenile joints, but that's really what is needed. A lot of counseling. Somebody to show some real concern and treat kids like human beings instead of just forcing their way on them whether they like it or not.

Actually, the counselors at Junior Village could be pretty rough. And I don't think too much that they did was in the rules of the institution. The thing was, whoever was in the cottage from 8 to 4, then we went by his rules and regulations—or hers, because there were also some dames that were counselors and some of them was pretty hot mamas too—they would tear up your ass! Some of the counselors had paddles, some of them used belts, and some just used their fists—depends on who they was hitting. If they was hitting one of the older or bigger guys, then they used their hands. Often the older and bigger guys would fight them back. If it was one of the younger or smaller guys, like myself, then we got paddled or hit with a switch—not what you'd call any real heavy punishment thing. Sometimes you got restricted from everything—not going out or not being able to play, and that was the worst.

I really don't think places like Junior Village are a good way to deal with kids that get into things at an early age. As a kid, you pay so much attention to how a dude's supposed to be a bad nigger, he really having his way around the joint with the counselors and with everybody. You start admiring people like that, you wanna be like them. You notice every-
she beating me, and I just bit down on my lip so I wouldn't cry. I just took it. And I took it. And I took the beating. And the longer I wouldn't cry, the harder she beat me because she wanted me to cry. I don't think my mother beat me ever again with a belt like that. 'Cause I didn't cry. Not then, but as soon as I got out of sight and back up in the woods, I cried. I was up there licking my wounds.

My little brother was like this too—he did the same thing at a very early age. My grandmother was trying to train him to ask for the pot. So now he didn't ask for the pot, and he messed up his diaper. My grandmother cleaned him up, and then she got a switch. She whupped him, telling him over and over to say “pot.” All he had to do was say “pot” and he would stop getting whupped. But wouldn't open his mouth. He would not open his mouth. He cried, but he would not say “pot.” And I cared so much about him that at one point I was ready to run into my grandmother and say, “Please stop. Beat me.” But my grandmother just kept whaling away, whaling away, and by him being much lighter complexion than I am, each time that switch came down on him it made a mark. Finally she stopped. She was convinced that she could not get him to say “pot.” Then a coupla hours later after the beating had wore off, he walked up to her just as polite and said, “Mama, I'm gonna say ‘pot’ to you.” And he did from then on. He was just determined not to say it then.

As far as hitting a kid, it's really up to the parents, but I don't think it's the best way to deal with a particular situation. Now, today the relationship that I have with my own kids is a beautiful relationship. Sometimes I feel like hitting them, but I control myself. A lot of times parents get things over a whole lot better to a kid when they don't be hitting on them all the times. It is really up to the parent and whether he'd want to bring his son or daughter up under that threat. That's what I see it as—under a threat. You know, I threaten my kids with bodily harm every time I see
I was moving out. Frog, myself, and Nut, we had a room, and my mother and the girls slept in another room. My grandparents had their bedroom, and then as we began to get older, Frog and I started staying in the front room on the let-out couch to make more space upstairs.

The biggest difference between our houses in Southwest and Southeast was something I couldn’t figure out at first. In Southwest in the front room we had an oil burner. That wasn’t too much hassle, ’cause you put some oil in it, light it, turn the little thing, and that was it. But when you got back to the other rooms, then it was coal stoves and wood stoves, and there’s a difference between a cooking stove and a heating stove that you have to know about. And wow, what a hassle!

So when we moved to Southeast, the first thing I’m looking for is what kind of stove I got to be bothered with. When I get in the kitchen, I dig this little white stove. I’m wondering where you put the coal at. So the first thing I done was open up the oven. Look mighty clean in there, must don’t go in there. One of my friends was with me; he didn’t know no more than I knew, but he happened to turn a knob and the fire jumped up.

Everything I drew come to the conclusion that this is what you cook with. Now how do you heat this joint? So then my mother say, “Turn this dial on the wall, and it heat the house.” I say, “Oh, no. I ain’t believe that at all.” “See these little things right here? The heat come out of them.” So I said, “Well, who’s fixing the fire?” I thought maybe somebody was in back of the house!

During that time, as far as money goes, my family usually got by. but things could get pretty tight. My grandfather worked for the D.C. Transit for thirty-some years; how he did that I don’t know. Some money came in from that and from gambling and bootlegging. But when you’re gambling, you ain’t always winning, so my grandfather had some bad times as well as some good.
We dressed poorly, but we never went hungry. Still, I always had the sense that I shouldn't ask for things, that I shouldn't make too many demands on my mother even coming up. I recognized that I couldn't because I knew that our family wasn't in that position. If I was to ask her for a football uniform or something like that, she wasn't able to just go downtown and get a football uniform. So most of the things I asked her for was sensible things. She tried, on things that I really really needed. Sometimes I went without, but I always say, "Moms gave it a good try."

Sometimes we had trouble paying our bills. We always talking about getting put out. We never were, though. My grandfather was a hell of a dude. There's a couple of things he believed in, and that was having some place to sleep and having something to eat. Even though we was threatened a lot of times and a lot of bills went unpaid, we always had them two main things. As the oldest kid, I always felt that I was supposed to not only contribute to the family but look out for Moms too, and I'm glad that I did realize that at an early age. Ever since I can remember, I always tried to keep the family thing together and do a little something for Moms. I think most oldest kids in the ghetto or middle class or whatever feel some sense of responsibility to their family. I think we all did. All us heads of families, that is.

When I was small I was a great finder; I used to find everything. "Where did you get this, boy?" "Oh, I found that around the corner." Sometimes I'd break into a store and during this time I wasn't money-hungry—I wanted food and cigarettes and candy. Most of the stores had bars on the windows. Bigger dudes would bend the bars, and by me being small, I'd slide right through. I'd be wanting a bag of them canned goods, and they'd be saying, "The money's underneath the counter in the cigar box." I got beat out of a lot of money like that 'cause all the dudes would split the money up and just give me a couple of dollars. But I got some candy or cigarettes, and I was all right. My mother say,
used to show a lot of cartoons and a lot of these little chapters—Flash Gordon and Captain Marvel and Rocket Man—and I never would miss them. We used to get our money together—enough for one person to get in, which in those days was nine cents. Once this person was in the movies, he'd sit down for about five minutes, then he'd open the side door. Ten or fifteen of us would rush in there. The man might catch a few dudes, but he never got everybody out of the movie. This was a regular thing.

Otherwise, we used to play mostly outdoor games, like hide-and-seek, and we liked daring each other. If somebody dared me to walk across the railroad track, which went across the river, then I would do it. We had a lot of fun just taking a plain cardboard box and sliding down the side of a hill near the railroad track. It was part of a game, 'cause we'd always see who got to the bottom first.

I didn't have a whole lot of toys when I was a kid, but I did have some animals. At one time we had a rooster in our backyard, and the rooster was as bad as the average dog. Anybody couldn't just go into the yard. I was terrified of that rooster when I was five or six years old. Me and him didn't get along, and I used to throw rocks at him.

My grandfather used to breed rabbits, which was fun, but mainly I think of my dog. Blackie. That dog lived for twenty-some years, and they said that was really something for a dog—to live twenty years. When I was a baby, he was a puppy. We grew up together, the dog and I. I started walking when I was seven or eight months old, and my mother said it was largely due to the dog. I'd be crawling around on the floor, and I'd pull up on the side of the dog. He would hold me steady and walk real slow with me until eventually I learned to have my balance and walk by myself.

Most of the time in my younger years, I was in the street with friends, but I used to do a few things together with my family. I can remember my mother when she was still very young taking me sleigh riding. But things like cookouts and family picnics just wasn't done where we were. I wasn't even hip to it. If we went on a picnic, it was mostly through some kind of organization, like the church.

There's two days that I always enjoyed, even now, and that's my birthday and Christmas. I remember waking up after we fixed the tree—we always had a little pine tree—and I always felt good going into the little packages I had. Mainly when I was young, the big deal was getting a stocking full of candy and fruit. Most of the things we got for Christmas wasn't really what you call fun things—some clothes, some shoes, a coat.

When I was real young, I also used to go to church with my grandfather's mother. She was a very religious person because my great-grandfather was a preacher. So I went to church with her when I was five or six. I recall that we used to go to Daddy Grace and Father Divine and all that kind of stuff. My grandfather and mother made us go to church quite a bit in my younger days but didn't go too much themselves. A lot of times I would just fake out like I was going and didn't really go. I used to go sit in the woods, throw rocks at cars or something like that. As I grew older, I got less and less interested in it even though I do believe in God and the son of God, Jesus Christ, and all that.

For me and my friends coming up, school was only a place to be when it got too hot or cold out in the street. There was some things I liked about it, but it didn't have very much to do with education. I used to like to work in the woodwork shop and metal-craft shops—I was very interested in things like that. But at the time I was going to elementary school, unless you was a hard case, then you didn't get in the shop. I was a hard case, so automatically I made shop. You had the man teaching, and he was always rough and ready to fight; and as soon as you said something smart, he'd go right up side your head. Whap! So it was pretty rough.
There was an apartment area called Parklands not too far from my neighborhood on Stanton Road in Southeast. People that lived in Parklands, we felt that they were better off than us 'cause we came out of the project. So when we did things, we did it to them. We housebreak their property, or we beat somebody up and rob them. I recall myself saying when I was around twelve, "Man, we got to make some money. Let's go down to Parklands." The majority of Parklanders was black, very few white. But they was better off than us, and we resented that. Some of the things I did in Parklands I would never do in the project.

The project was my out for everything. We always felt that if we done something at Parklands and could just make it across Alabama Avenue to the project, we would be safe. You could go in almost anybody's house—right in the front door and right on out the back door. If something did happen in the project, then it would usually happen to a stranger. You never knew how they got to the project, but whatever happened, they was sorry they got there.

The little contact I had with blacks who was doing better than me turned me right off. I still remember going to a little party at Parklands. There was six or seven of us, and when they opened the door and let us in, they said, "Oh, Lord, here come the project niggers!"

I had an aunt who was in better shape than what we were, but I just didn't dig how she lived. I couldn't function in her environment. All she ever talked about was "That boy, he going to be bad." I recall thinking at one time that what people now call middle-class blacks was really rich black people. Man, they got cars, big color T.V.'s. I'd see them when I would be coming through somebody else's neighborhood, which wasn't often. I really disliked them people, 'cause it seemed like they thought they was better 'cause they had more. And I don't think that because somebody got a little more than the next person that he or she should think that he or she is better. Their luck's a little better maybe, but that's all. It was a fairly strong feeling we had of niggers against Negroes.

I never really thought of coming up any different than I did. I never thought how it would be if I was to come up in the suburbs or middle class. What I was aware of living at 2nd and G was that if I crossed 4th and G, then I was going to have to fight! In Southeast on Stanton Road we lived in a project called Garfield. If we went to another project, Berry Farm, then we could expect trouble. My world was limited to a matter of blocks, alleys, shortcuts getting through all the turfs. I didn't know what was happening in Pakistan or even in Bladensburg, Maryland. I remember riding out to the suburbs in my great-uncle's car once and seeing all these trees. It seemed like I was never going to stop seeing trees; no houses, nothing but trees. That was an experience for me, but it made me uncomfortable because I knew them alleys and back streets. I didn't know the trees. I would have been a babe in the woods, but in them alleys and little cutoffs, I was the king of kings.

The only way I ever knew about things that happened outside my neighborhood was through magazines. We had a T.V. for a while, and everybody on the block used to come and watch it, but it was Captain Video cartoons—it wasn't like sitting there looking at the six o'clock news. I didn't dig the television all that much, and I was busy doing other things. There'd be people coming in the house, sitting down looking at the T.V., all the lights out, and I'd be crawling around trying to check out the girls. There's no doubt I missed a lot of things.

I remember Adlai Stevenson running for President. There was a big car come into the neighborhood with a flashing sign saying, VOTE FOR ADLAI STEVENSON. I asked my grandfather, "What's that car all about?" And he said,
“Elections.” I said, “Oh,” like I was right on top of it, but it really didn’t mean nothing to me. It didn’t dawn on me to want to know anything about it, and nobody I knew ever talked about government or politics or nothing like that.

But I learned a lot from magazines. There was a group of people from one of those little community center things that come into the neighborhood and would give us old magazines—Jet, Look, Life. Then we’d always be hanging around the junkyard, and I come across a lot of books, but mostly magazines. Most of the time I really didn’t know what was what because I was a very poor reader, but I was interested in the pictures.

Occasionally I used to go to upper Northwest and walk around and just dig how the whites live. I have been in a white neighborhood and was stopped by the police maybe three times—“What you doing around here, boy?” Being aware that I’m black in a white neighborhood and something could happen, I didn’t do it much. But I feel like I know more about their world than they know about mine. I can tell some people that’s maybe uptown in the well-to-do neighborhoods about my world, and they don’t know nothing about what I’m telling them. But I have found out about them from curiosity and investigation.

Like a game I used to play a long time ago—magazine game. Me and somebody else be looking at a magazine, and everything on this page is mine and everything on that page is his. We turn the page and there might be a real pretty house on this page, and this is mine. And there might be a real pretty car on his page, and he say this is his. It was a mental game that I played with myself.

But I was more curious about the people than anything else. If you don’t know a person unless you live in that neighborhood, it’s not really easy to get to know that person. Because people are so suspicious of people, a lot of times rightfully so. My solution for that was to dress properly and go in some place, like a nice restaurant. I was inquisitive about things like that.

I also knew one or two Hell’s Angels from the Virginia area, and they made me an honorary member. I used to hang around those spots sometimes, just to watch them. I found that most of them was from well-to-do or rich families, majority white. I dug the wildness. The whole gang was interesting to me. Here’s a whole bunch of guys riding around on motorcycles looking rough. What is this all about? I used to go and watch them race other gangs, challenge each other.

Of course, I didn’t do these things until I was in my twenties. When I was younger I wasn’t really aware of things like that, and what I was aware of, I took for granted. Like living close as I did to the Capitol, I just took it for granted. To me it was an everyday thing. In my younger days, as far as knowing what be going on in the Capitol, I didn’t. It was just the Capitol. I didn’t relate the Capitol as being the capital of the United States, or I didn’t relate D.C. as being the capital or the White House as being where the President live. It was just the White House. What went on there, I paid little or no attention to. It had to be something really outstanding for me to dig on it. Like the ambassador that got busted in the ’50’s bringing over narcotics. Or congressmen taking bribes, something that the papers and the media played up and you just heard about it. But it still didn’t make any difference to me, because I always thought of it as instead of taking money with a pistol, they just taking it with a pen. Maybe not so much the government, but I think of the more well-formed organized crime now where it’s mostly paperwork.

Sometimes I feel that from the President down—Congress, senators—they have things dictated to them to do certain things. How I arrive at this decision is I feel that if the president of the multimillion-dollar corporations, say G.M. or Du Pont, want something done, they get it done, and they get it done through these people. They the real ones that make a lot of big decisions. All the little class of corporations follow the big ones’ lead.
I feel as though decisions that have been made by big corporations or big industry have affected me somewhere along the line, though I couldn't explain exactly how. I don't feel that what they doing is wrong. To them, it's just making a buck—a group of people getting over. Now, I'm gonna try to get over in any way I can, and they getting over the best way they know how. There's conflict in there because my kind of crime is generally looked down upon, but the white-collar crime is an altogether different bag. Like Ehrlichman deciding when be wants to go to jail. Don't nobody tell me I can decide. If they wanted to come and get me today, they could do it. I don't like it, but then Ehrlichman has enough smarts to put himself in that position. If I had enough smarts to put myself in that position, then I'd take advantage of the opportunity and do it. So I can't fault him, but I can be mad with him. To think about it, say damn, here's a dude that can tell the judge, "Well, look, I'm ready to start doing my time now." It's strange. But mostly I just take a far-off attitude toward who's making the decisions. I don't ever think along them lines.

The decisions I've always been aware of are made by dudes who are up one day and down the next. There's a drug baron I know, a pretty big boy. He was supplying a lot of people with synthetic narcotics. When that first came out, he was one of the main controllers, and he put it in circulation and made a pretty big piece of money. Then he got into a couple of beefs, so he had to pay out for special lawyers. People talked about how good he was doing, how much money he was making, the diamonds on his fingers, the ride that he had. But two or three months later it was a totally different conversation—about how bad he was doing and how he lost some of his main connections.

It's really who you know and how much money you got that makes you a big shot. I seen a big drug dealer I worked for get as much as seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of narcotics without paying a dime. The same person that he got it from, I couldn't get a hundred dollars' worth from under no circumstances. You've got to keep in mind that drugs is a product, and it's a product that's high on the best-selling list, so that automatically makes it big business. Some of the same motions are being made that would be in legal business.

The only big shots I've been personally involved with have made it this way, through drugs or numbers or something like that. There's some other people I've heard of that are trusted and respected to a certain extent. Not trusted with information that might get somebody locked up, but trusted to go tell a problem to or to try to help you solve a problem. There's a congressman that people respect and other members of the Black Caucus in Congress that have got power and are legit all the way down the line. There's a member of the city council that I heard has done some good things. But when I think about who's got the power in my neighborhood, I mostly think about people who've got to the top in strictly illegal ways.

When I was ten or eleven, a day never passed without me stealing some things or getting into some fights. Sometimes I used to go to the playground, but most of the time me and my friends had our own little spots, little alleys and airways where we'd play or in abandoned trucks or cars. Beside the railroad track we'd play in the cardboard boxes. One of the main things we used to do was go to the Capitol, the monument, the museum, and play hambones and tap-dance like we did up at Herzog's. Around the Capitol by Union Station they got fountains that they used like wishing wells. People come from out of town visiting and they throw a quarter, a dime, in these wells. Our thing was to lay around and wait till a group come by and they throw some money in the fountain. Immediately we'd take off our clothes, get in the
fountain, and get the money. Stealing watermelons and what have you off the wharf in the summertime was a lot of fun too. Then I used to love to go in Union Station. For one thing it was real easy to steal in there and for another thing, I liked to watch the people—going by, catching trains, getting off trains, just crowds of people going somewhere. Those were the only places I ever saw white people as a kid.

Remember, my world was small, and it had a lot of danger that you just had to deal with. If somebody lived two or three blocks away and came into our neighborhood, then they would have to deal with us. This was especially so after things got bad with street gangs, and it wasn't safe to go too far unless you went with a large group or had your own boys with you. Going by yourself a couple of blocks from your own block, you was in trouble. I lived at 2nd and G Streets, and every time I would go up to 4th Street, I'd have to deal with the dudes that lived in that area. If you go even further up to 7th Street, then you'd have to deal with the people in that neighborhood, and on up to 10th Street and the island. But I got a break up there 'cause my cousin Frog lived there when he wasn't living with me.

During this time, in my own neighborhood we weren't real organized, but we did have our own little system. My job was getting into places 'cause I was small. Maybe a dude that's heart wasn't too big, we'd leave him outside to chichi—to watch. We knew most of the time what we was going after when we went in these little places. Different guys would request different things. My main thing was carrying cigarettes and edible stuff. Most of the places we broke into at that time was just little corner stores that didn't have much that was really valuable aside from food. Once we got into a store we would break down in groups, just like I did in later years in stickups.

So say there's five of us. I go through a window and open up the door so everybody else can come in. The chichi man, he's outside watching. So that makes four of us in the store. Two guys would do nothing but look for money or what-

ever other things was of value—guns, watches, rings. Sometimes those little storekeepers will have a gun or shotgun up under the counter somewhere where they could get to it in case of an armed robbery. The other two guys would be bagging things up that people wanted. A guy might have wanted a certain kind of canned good and he'd say, "Get all the sardines." Mainly we took cigarettes, candy, and food—just childish stuff.

The splitting up of the things became valuable because if you only stood on the corner and watch, then you didn't get as much as the dude that went in. Of course, if you got busted, you all got the same time, but ain't nobody look at that. They look at all you're doing is watching, you got a better chance of getting away than anybody else, so you don't get as much. Later when I started sticking up, I wouldn't do it like that. I would always give everybody an even cut, even the drivers. I found that you get along a whole lot better that way.

In those days, though, we never did no real skillful planning or taking down notes when we were checking out a place we wanted to rob. Not like I learned to do later on when I'd watch how many times a police routine check went by. It was just like we see a place, and if it was easy for us to get in by like climbing the drainpipe or going through a window, then we'd decide to do just that. And most of the times it was very easy.

The trouble come in if the people that owned the store lived in the back of the store or over top of the store. When you go into places like that, the people are always kind of listening out for you. I have ran into that problem a couple of times, but being fast on my feet got me out. It was strictly amateur stuff that we did, and I think we got away with a lot of it because it was so easy—it sure wasn't because we was professional!

We always tried to get the dude that the neighbors didn't like too much or the guy that was hard on the people who lived in the neighborhood. Like, some storekeepers wouldn't
to me that wasn't too hip. So I started an argument. It came to the point where we did a little struggling—he pushed me around and grabbed me. So now on top of his taking what I figure belongs to me and the rest of the guys and roughing me up a little bit, I figure something had to be done. Okay. So now I think about things like this: Because you the boss, you already up there. So don't take what yours and then take some of mine too. Especially when you're getting twice as much as what I'm getting in the beginning! I just wasn't going to let him get away with it.

Now, I had stole a gun from my grandfather some time before this. During this particular time, my grandfather was going strong in the bootlegging business and in gambling. Being a bootlegger and a gambler made him have a lot of weapons around the house. Dudes would come in and pawn their gun for a bottle or something like that. Lose their gun over the crap table. One particular day—you know how every now and then you just go through everything when you home by yourself—I find five pistols in my grandfather's mattress, and I take one of them.

Before I got that gun, I never had no regular experience with a pistol or rifle, even though I did have occasion to fire one once or twice before I stole that one. Nobody ever taught me how to use a gun; but during this time, the stables that was behind my house was just about ready to close down. A lot of times I would go through the alley or through the backyard and set up tin cans near the stable and fire away. Mainly it was this dude we always call Skeeter, who used to shoot with me. I remember on one occasion we found a gun after some people had moved. Of course, guns wasn't really that hard to get when I was younger. I seen plenty of guns that I could have stole or taken if you just was in the right place, and most of the time I was.

Skeeter and I kind of taught each other, and we learned from our mistakes. We used to shoot at a lot of different objects until we got to learn the pistol pretty well. That's
one of the things that I learned later on in life: to know your weapon, especially when you're out there every day on the streets into this, into that. You into narcotics, you into prostitution, you into robbery and what have you. I had to know my weapon, especially like in '69, when ten to fifteen weapons a week used to go through my hands.

But then I didn't know exactly what kind of gun I had. Now, my grandfather used to keep a lot of bullets in the china closet, in the dresser drawers. What I would do, I would just get a couple of handful of bullets and they'd be all mixed up. All different kinds and sizes. I'd just try them out in the gun and see if they fit. If they fit, I'd try to find five more.

So this particular day after my argument with the boss of the gang, I go on home and find the gun. Sometimes I used to bury that pistol. I used to hide it in a lot of places—sometimes in the horse stables. I think this particular time I had it in the woodpile. I just got the gun and went back to our little hideout. I asked the boss, say, "You going to straighten it up or what?" And he said, "No." And I knew that I couldn't beat him straight up fighting. So I shot him.

He lost 'cause I shot him, and when I shot him, he acted like he was dying when it was only a shot in the leg. So automatically everybody else looked upon me as being the boss. A title that I didn't mind at all. I think that's kind of what I wanted all the time anyway, 'cause even though I had some say in a gang, I never would join any gang if I couldn't be one of the bosses or the boss. At that particular time, I was just one of the bosses 'cause I was an expert in climbing and getting in small places. Now after shooting him, it was like a complete takeover, so I was the boss. It was just part of the code. I had won, so now I was the number one boss. Simple as that. The other guys didn't feel one way or another as far as feeling sorry for him.

He wasn't badly hurt, so he still stayed in the gang for the day or two before I got busted, even though he wasn't boss any more. He was waiting for his chance to get back, but I had a little more heart than he did. I had the courage to do more things than he did when it really came down to it. Because I was much younger and smaller than most of the crowd that I hung with, I always felt that I had to do twice the job that anyone else did. It's like the old saying that black people have to try twice as hard. I had to do a better job for the simple reason of proving to them that I could do it, that I could hold my own. I was just as smart, just as rough, just as tough as they were. I let them know it. I let them know it every chance I got. Speaking up was just part of my nature. There have been a lot of times when other people could have spoken up, but I was the one that did it.

The thing is that all my life I always seem to make that first move. Sometimes I want to. A lot of times I don't. But I made it simply because I have to stay in tune with myself—always doing what is expected of me. That's why I felt I had to say something when that gang boss took more than he was due. I had to be the one. Back then the gang leaders had all the say, and it was like they was generals and we was privates. The gang leader had to live up to a lot of things, and if somebody else in the gang thought he could whip the gang leader—thought he could beat him fighting or in a knife battle—then he would simply challenge him. If the gang leader lost, then the guy that won would automatically take his place. Which is what happened with me.

But that time I didn't stay the boss too long 'cause I got busted for shooting him. Of course, he say he didn't tell, but I know he must have snitched on me. I've heard the police got him. I've heard that some of his people made him tell, but exactly why he told I don't know. He knew that snitching was against everything that we was brought up to do. That's the last thing in the world that I would do. I have my sneaking suspicion that he wanted to take the gang back. So he told on me and the police just come around to my house. They never did get the gun though. By the time they came,
I had put the gun in its final resting place, buried in my backyard. But they got me anyway.

I was about twelve years old and there wasn't a trial. In them days they just held you at the receiving home until your court date come up, and then the judge did his thing — either send you away or let you go home with your mother. My mother was there, but I never went home with her. It was Junior Village again for me, and I knew it. The judge wasn't that much harder on me, though he talked a whole lot harder. He said he should send me away until I was twenty-one, and man, I was scared 'cause I knew that old fool wasn't jiving. But I looked so sad that he didn't.

The second time at Junior Village was much easier. The first time I went there, even though I knew a lot of people, I had to learn my way around — who was the tough guys, who was the homosexuals, how this particular counselor was, what time to eat, what time to go to bed, and who to look out for. The second time I go, I'm already aware of all this. I knew what counselors was the roughest. I knew the top people — other inmates like myself that could move around a little more freely. The badder or the tougher that you acted, then that made you always have the easiest jobs. People tried to pacify you. The first time it took me a month or two just to feel my way around — learn things. The second time I just fit, like a hand into a glove.

War in the Streets

When I got out of Junior Village the second time I was almost fourteen, and the streets had really changed. Everyone had joined a gang, and the most important thing that was going on was gang fights. Now, a lot of these guys in the gangs were pretty big and pretty tough. I have been president or boss of several gangs, but only that once where I shot that guy was it through a takeover. Most of the crowds I hung with had a whole lot of experience, and until I had that experience I didn't make my move. When I did make my move, I made it through becoming a warlord — I just handled all the weapons. When the dudes called a meeting, they thought about me knowing how to do everything. I know the right place to hit somebody with a rock and a sock — that was one of the main gang-fight weapons — or I knew how to make a zip gun real well or I knew how to handle an ice pick and a straight razor or a stiletto or a switchblade. I even knew how to handle small rifles and pistols.

Gang fights involved just mobs of youngsters — maybe seventy-five or eighty youngsters to each gang. A lot of times gang fights took real finesse; a whole lot of planning went into them. If my gang challenge your gang to a fight, then my gang would have to fight in your territory if we didn't make arrangements to fight someplace else. We got quite a few challenges because the real numbers of my gang
wasn't known and a lot of people thought that it was much smaller than the usual gangs. But it wasn't. In fact, I think we had a little more fellows than some of the other gangs. Then there was also the question of strength—how many bad niggers live in that particular neighborhood?

We got a lot of challenges, which gave us some headway, 'cause that meant a lot of fights was on our own ground. Now, a rival gang when they just outright challenged you always wanted to use you as a stepping stone, just like boxers do. They figure if they could chalk up a lot of wins in gang fights, then they'd be in a better position to fight somebody big. Now, the advantages of having a gang challenge your gang and fighting in your territory is who knows your territory better than you and your gang? We knew all the little alleys and back alleys and the old houses to climb on top of and to go in or what bushes to hide behind, or what old cars to hide behind, or how we would spring out and trap them, how we would close them in in a particular block.

I recall one time in a gang fight we stole a car to block off this other gang's car, which had their president and about five other dudes in it. Usually cars like these would be stolen, and when they came to a fight, they'd just drive in. Then their mob come in behind them. Or sometimes they'll drive through to see what they can see, how we set things up. But we was always witty enough to never give ourselves away.

One of my main gang fight plans was this: to stay just outside of the area we was about to fight in. When I lived at 2nd and G, we had most of our fights on 2nd Street between G and F. So now what we would do is stand some people maybe on the other side of the street—about fifteen or twenty guys—and give them some bats and other weapons. When the other gang come in, they count the dudes, see how many there is, then report back and come to war. Okay. When they come in, our fifteen or twenty guys see fifty or sixty or as many as eighty guys coming, then nattly they might throw a few bricks or pop off a couple of zip guns, but that would be it.

By our guys being outnumbered, the other gang would continue to come and our guys would continue to retreat. This retreat, it was beautiful. I used to love it, and I don't care who we was fighting. Every time they used to fall for it. If they'd fall on our territory, that was the best thing. The other gang would fall right into the trap we had laid for them. Then we would close off the street behind them. There would be members of our gang cutting them off. And we would just hit them from all sides. Both sides of the street, because most gang fights used to be right in the streets.

Every now and then we'd have guys on the rooftops with zip guns or guys up there with just a big pile of bricks. Maybe there was a guy in the gang who really couldn't handle a knife or ice pick or bat or chain very good, so we put him on the roof, let him climb up the drainpipe, give him a pile of bricks, and just let him whale away.

When my gang challenged another gang, then I would always try to find some kind of way of going into the other gang's section. We only had a one-to-two-to-three-block radius, that was our territory. I would ease onto their turf, especially if I knew where the fight was supposed to be held. I would always check it out and see if we could be ambushed, and what they could do or what I would do if I lived in that particular section of town. How I would fight it. Kind of like generals matching wits.

A lot of times I would send fifteen or twenty members of my gang into the other neighborhood. Okay. Now, a lot of guys was hip to this, so instead of attacking, they'll hold off. I knew this too 'cause I had the occasion where only part of a gang come into our territory, and then when we ambushed them, the rest of their gang came, so I learned from that experience. Okay. So now they didn't ambush those first guys, so you send in say ten or fifteen more. When you
send in ten or fifteen more, then they are almost sure to get ambushed because the opposite gang is going to believe that's all you have. When they ambush them and they get to fighting, I'd bring in my reserves. I even figured out a way once or twice for some of my boys to get up on their rooftops and bombs away. It was a lot of fun. I kind of miss them days. I really do because I knew I was the best general there was. General John. Can't you see it now? If I only had my chance in the armed forces . . .

I was in the Keystones in S.E. Then we changed our name from the Keystones to the Tagalongs. There were other gangs like the Southwest Stompers—we fought them—Peach and Honey, Tophat, the Mau-Maus. One of the most powerful gangs that ever came out of the district was the Mau-Maus, but the most powerful gang in Washington, D.C., in them gang-fighting days was Le Broit Park. Le Broit Park was said to have seven hundred members. They had branches everywhere—S.E., S.W., N.W.—but their main branch was in the N.W., up around the ball park. Because of their large numbers, they easily moved over quite a few gangs.

There was a time when I was up on their turf in N.W., visiting a girl I had met. At the time, I had on my Tagalong sweater and a little cap, letting them know that I was one of the Tagalongs. About six Le Broit Park members chased me clean out of N.W.

We also had occasion to get in a semi-big rumble with them. What it was all about I don't really remember. But when they came, they came. They must have stole every truck and car in seeing view. There was so many of them that it really wasn't even a fight. Seeing all the trucks and all them niggers piling off, then we knew we didn't have a chance. All them victories I had planned—there just wasn't no way. So we scattered. But we had to save face, 'cause when we scattered that didn't look too good. So we did a lot of picking, a lot of dummy attacks. We met on this playground field where we were supposed to fight. Twenty-five or thirty guys would rush the field, pop off some zip guns, throw some bricks and bottles, maybe get into a few tangles, and then back off. Hit them and run, hit them and run, until finally they just got tired of it. They didn't know where we was going to come from next, what we was going to do next, so finally they got off our turf. But when it go down in the books, they was the victors of that particular fight because of all of us scattering in the beginning.

Nobody ever interfered with the gangs while a fight was going on. As I remember it, the police always came when it was over or about over, just when everybody is either tired or hurt or shot or just plain scared. Then you could hear all these sirens and cars squealing, and of course everybody that could make it would run or be carried away. Both gangs would scatter.

The police didn't pose no real threat to us. We knew they had informers on the street even then, and if it was a big enough fight jumping off, they might come. But a lot of times they didn't even bother about it. I guess it was "Let all them niggers kill each other." When the larger gangs got together, with eighty or ninety dudes a piece, that ain't no little bit of niggers. That's a lot of hard heads. So when they knew about these bigger gangs getting into it, then sometimes they would kind of police the area. But 90 percent of the time the police never come until after, when there was maybe ten or twelve guys laying around on the ground or holding their faces or trying to limp away or drag theirselves away to keep from getting caught.

There was usually a few guys that did get seriously hurt. When you get hit with a bat, then you seriously hurt. Or when you get hit with a chain or if somebody stab you with an ice pick or a straight razor or shoot you with a zip gun. I was just lucky, 'cause I was into this for about three years, from fourteen to seventeen, and none of them things ever
happened to me. I mean, I've been beat up on—that kind of hurt—punched in the face, black eye. But real hurt like shot or stabbed or beat real bad with a bat, that never happened to me. A lot of my friends wasn't so fortunate. A lot of them still carry scars from old gang-fight days.

When I was around fourteen a couple of things happened that stopped me from doing little things and started me doing bigger things. I found out that people with little or nothing try harder to keep what they have. Like, I believe all ghetto kids start off yoke robbing or snatching pocketbooks or something like that. Now, I was yoke man of the year—I could grab somebody around the neck better than anybody in my neighborhood and hold them that way. So one day me and my friend Snap was in our hideout spot we called the hole in the wall when my cousin Frog came looking for us. He said there was an old man with a cane walking down Stanton Road who had a lot of money on him. So we decided to go after him. I would yoke the man, Snap would hit him, and Frog would be taking everything he could get—shoes, rings, money, and anything else.

Well, that old man fooled the hell out of us—he was like a bull. When I came up behind him and put my arm around his neck, he threw me on top of Snap and we both hit the ground. Then he takes his cane and come down with it on Frog's back, and Frog ran like hell. By the time I get myself together and ram into the old man again, he had hit me about three times with the cane, but I get him around the legs and pull him down. Snap was back in by then, but the old man was too much for us. We started to run, but the old bull was right behind us. He ran after us for five long blocks. After the Old Bull, as I call him, I never yoked anyone again.

The other thing that taught me not to take from poor people happened around the same time. I was just out walk-

ing the streets one day doing nothing, and all at once this lady was in front of me holding her handbag in her hand. And I decided to take it. Man, what did I do that for?

I walked beside her, and she looked down and said hello. She look like she was about forty years old or so. I said hi. I guess I looked like a little boy to her, but then that's what I really was. I got that handbag from her before she knew what had hit her, and I was off and running with it under my arm. I went down through Camp Sims, which is an army camp, and once I got behind the camp I stopped to see how much money was in the bag. Then I heard something. I looked up, and there was that woman coming right at me.

Off again I went down this long, long hill, and at the end of the hill where the woods began, I stopped again and began to go into the handbag. But there she was again, right on top of me. So I took off into the woods, and when I got to the stream, I run upstream and then crossed to the other side. Man, I had to stop 'cause I had run myself out. I fell in the woods and just stayed there, and soon I could hear the woman coming upstream. I didn't move, hoping that she would go right past me, but she didn't. When I looked up, she was looking right in my face. She said, "Why did you do that, young man? There's nothing in there but papers. Ain't no money in it." So I said, "Then why the hell was you running after me like that?" She say, "'Cause I want my papers back." I picked up a big rock and said, "Take your damn papers and get out of the woods before I kill your black ass up here." Then she got scared. I could hear her making her way through the woods after she left me. Man, was I glad! From then on I made up my mind that I would never do anything to a poor person again.

We didn't lighten up on robbing the stores any, but it was a whole lot of difference between yoke robbing and breaking into a store. I think I felt that store owners could take the loss when I broke in there. It wouldn't hurt them
that much, but it would help me and other members of my
gang and their families and my family a whole lot when I
did do it. Even though these people only owned very small
stores, just by them having the store alone made me know
that they was doing better than I was.

But like the old man and that woman, the people with
very little fought so hard for the little they had. Say I felt
like going out and robbing something, and there's a bank on
one corner and there's a gas station on the other corner.
Now you see the man pumping gas all day long, and he got
a big old roll in his pocket. Which one would you rob? The
bank, of course. Why? Less risk. The man been pumping gas
all day long, he tired, he been working hard, and he's not
going to give that money up as easy as a bank teller would.
A bank teller in a bank behind the cage counting somebody
else's money out to him or taking somebody else's money in,
they not going to get hurt for their scratch. They going to
give it up. But the gas station attendant, that's his money
most of the time, and he'll take a loss if he's robbed. Sometimes
he may even have to pay back what's been taken in a
robbery. Most of the time, that's all he has. So I would rather
walk into the bank any day with all their cameras and secur-
ity officers and silent alarms and loud alarms and secret
alarms and push-button flowers and all that stuff. I would
rather go facing the cameras and the FBI than rob a gas
station. Not only will the guy in the gas station buck on you,
but he will pull a gun and shoot somebody.

Robbing is an art, and the whole art of robbing is fear,
and the main reason for robbing is to get what you came
after—the money—and get away. You don't go there to
hurt people. Sometimes you have to. Sometimes you do it
in self-defense or because a person is trying to protect their
property, but most of the time that somebody gets hurt is
when somebody bucks: "I'm not giving you nothing. If you
want it from me, then you have to kill me." I heard that a
lot of times, but you really don't have to do that. If you
instill the fear the moment that the robbery started to take
place, then you got more than half the battle won. When
you succeed in getting away—find a good escape route—
then that's the whole battle right there.

When I was a kid, before I really got into the stickup
thing, my family kind of had other hopes for me and some-
times so did I. For a while I thought about going into the
navy, see the world. My grandmother, she wanted me to be
d a doctor because I was good with my hands. And my
mother, she wanted me to be a lawyer. Maybe it could have
come to pass, but I really couldn't see it because that meant
working real hard in school. I asked somebody about being
a doctor, I think it was one of the playground dudes who
ran little recreation things. And they was saying you got to
go here for four years and do this for three years and do this
for three more years. Before I could be a doctor, I'd be
withered away!

I didn't become interested in law until my later years. By
then, I thought I'd better find out a little something. Before
that, it just wasn't in me. I had other ideas. I probably could
have worked harder in school, but the one or two times I
thought about college I always was thinking about what my
mother going to have to pay. While I be laying back in
college learning and being cool, they would have to be
footing the bills! But nobody ever talked to me about get-
ing a job, going to college part-time or in the daytime. I
never knew.

People constantly saying, "Why don't you do better?
Why don't you do this or why don't you do that?" I don't
know how to do this; I don't know how to do that. This is
all I know. I know how to steal. I know how to be hard on
broad. I know how to stick somebody up better than any-
thing. I know how to take a small amount of narcotics and
eventually work it way up and make me some money. Fenc-
ing property or credit cards, I know how to do all that. But
Society says all that's wrong. I feel like it's survival, making
the dollar. I don't have nothing against a guy that makes a
dollar. Whatever his bag is, that's his bag.
No one ever taught me anything else. My old friends and I never saw the light—there was no one to show us the right things to do. But there was someone always ready to show us something slick or hip. We listening with all ears, but they never told us the part about jail. We had to find that out for ourselves. And there we learned more and couldn’t wait to hit the streets again to try out something new. If it worked, good. If it didn’t, then back in jail. By the time I got to a certain age, I just had forgotten all that stuff about jobs and college. I just omitted the whole thing. I was getting what I wanted out of street life, and I was doing far better than what I thought I would actually do.

You know, my grandmother would pat me on the head and say, “One day you going to be a good doctor like Dr. Snoobinoff or somebody.” And I say, “Uh-hum.” And all the time I’m saying to myself, Where the cash going to come from? Who am I going to operate on around here—some of these big rats? Now there’s a few people from this neighborhood that have done something like that, become like businessmen, dentists. I know a couple of dentists that come up with me. I even know some robbers, dudes that used to steal with me, that became police. In my late teens there was a dude that was with me on a charge that is a detective now. He was one of the lucky ones. A few make it. Some got good jobs. Some wouldn’t accept it like it was, and they wanted to change things. Of course, now everybody go about it a different way. Some dudes figure they’ll work their way out. I say, well, I’ll rob my way out.

Going to school didn’t really teach me to do nothing besides the things I ended up doing. There was a few things I used to like, a couple of teachers I used to like, but it just wasn’t enough.

In junior high, I was beginning to learn a little something ’cause I had a teacher named Mr. Samuels. And Mr. Samuels was a really, really rough dude. He drummed and he made you learn. It made it easier to learn ’cause Mr. Samuels was a big, black, bad nigger and was mean. He came out of the same type of neighborhood, same type of environment, and was out there before we were, so that automatically made him hipper than what we was or a little tougher. He not only would whip your ass if you did something wrong, but he also took the time to pull you aside when it was his lunch hour or after school, not so much to scold you but to really try to help you get into this learning thing. He was my homeroom teacher because he had all the supposedly bad dudes in his class.

But except for Mr. Samuels, most of the teachers weren’t getting across to me. They couldn’t think of things to keep me occupied, to keep me learning. I think that’s one of the things I regret more than anything else. I really had no chance to learn ’cause classrooms were so filled. Always was filled. Never really had time to get to each individual, and I think in my earlier years that’s what I needed. More individual attention as far as learning goes, ’cause after a time of being neglected, I just got uninterested.

When things got a little more interesting in school, it was because I was in a faster circle. I even learned a few little things in junior high school, things dealing with my profession. I think I stayed in junior high school about four years, but after a year I got tired of it all and started hanging in the poolroom and cutting up. We was doing everything. Go get some wine and get high. Come back and turn the school out.

As far as studying go, I had the most trouble with reading and spelling, and I didn’t know why. I just never could read and never could spell. I really didn’t like studying. This might sound kind of strange and you might not call this a study, but the only thing I can remember being interested in when I was young and I called it a study—my own little personal young-dude-out-of-the-ghetto study—was I used to kill things or hurt bugs and see which one of them would
die first. Would the grasshopper die first or the cockroach die first? Two big old rats. You'd catch them in the kitchen. If the traps don't kill them, catch them. Hurt them and see which one dies first. That was a study. That's the only studying I did.

Most of my friends was pretty much like myself. They just didn't care one way or the other about school. But I don't care where you go or what you do—there's always somebody different from the majority. The loner. Maybe 90 percent of the people in my neighborhood did things my way, but there was always one or two guys or a couple of dames that played it straight. Went to school like they were supposed to and really got over later on in life. I ran across a couple of them at one time or another, and they was doing all right. But as for me I don't think I was better or worse at school than my friends. We came out of the same type of environments. We all had to do just about the same things, and our lives were very much the same.

One of the things that was real hip about school was we had a little protection racket going. Your position in that depended on your mob, what street you was off, what block you lived in, and just how tough you were—could you take it as well as you put it out? Normally I would walk up to another kid and say, "From this day on you have to bring me ten cents every day." And usually it would be a kid that I know could produce ten cents. A lot couldn't produce ten cents. You could say anything, but the ten cents just wasn't going to be there. As it went on, some was up even higher—fifty-cent dudes or dollar dudes.

So now some dudes will buck on you. They'll say, "What, ten cents? What you talking about?" You had to be able to show him why he had to pay you ten cents. So you immediately go up side his head. If somebody else approached him about protection, you understand, then he would automatically come to me. Now, if I was weak and couldn't straighten it up with whoever else was pressing him, then I might end up having to pay to somebody else. You had to be able to take it as well as dish it out. But if you could fight, then nobody took advantage of you. I had a lot of problems because I was small for my age. I had to fight twice as hard. I got to be able to whip Joe Blow. And if I can't whip Joe Blow, then everybody will get me. It's a way of taking care of yourself, on your own, at a very young age. If you're tougher than this guy and he got a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and you ain't got no lunch, then half of his—or all of it—going to be yours. The thing was there wasn't never enough to go around. There wasn't a whole lot that was doing better than most of the kids in the same boat with me, but you always tend to look at the one who's doing a little better, live in a different neighborhood. And them the ones that always get pressed—beat up, money taken, lunch taken.

Those dudes got hard times from everybody, so a lot of them used to employ the fighters. They knew they couldn't fight theirselves, so they immediately be your buddy, take you to stores, buy you whatever you want, carry it for you. They wanted you to be around, 'cause they knew if somebody else say something, you would immediately speak up.

It was really something, but it was a lot of fun. I know one thing: out of all the things I've done—and I done more bad than good—I done some cruel things, I done some unnecessary things, but I'm not really sorry for maybe three things I done my whole life. 'Cause I like to have fun in my life, and in school I had a lot of fun, just none of it had much to do with education. I dropped out of school permanently when I was about seventeen—I think it was '59. I had to get a job 'cause my first kid was being born, Cynthia—Brown Sugar.
Love and Other Troubles

My next beef with the law came when I was sixteen. Everything was on time from fourteen to sixteen years old. I had a few small beefs but nothing serious. At this time, I had a girl called Dee Dee. She was my girl for at least two years, so sex was nothing to us any more. In other words, I had her so many times that doing it was like a good fight, and there's no way I could count how many times I've had a good fight. So when I got busted in '58, the charge was, believe it or not, rape on Dee Dee!

This is how that came about. One day I heard that Dee Dee was seeing another dude. At first I didn't do anything 'cause I figured there was always someone to take her place. What I didn't know was my feeling for her was deeper than I thought, and I didn't dig another nigger messing with her. (In them days, it was all right if a black person called another black a nigger, but it was hell if a white person called a black a nigger. I guess it was like someone said: white people couldn't say "nigger" right.)

Anyway, I heard about Dee Dee and this other dude meeting after school, and I didn't like it, so I put my spys to work. One day my boy Snap and I was coming from the poolrooms when Reggie came up to us. Reggie used to go with Dee Dee before I did; in fact, I took her away from him, but he was one of my ace spys now. He told me that Dee Dee was at the school rec room with Shrimp, the dude that she was messing with. So my walk man—my partner—and I went up there, and when we walked in the door, I saw Dee Dee and a girlfriend of hers standing in the corner. I looked around for the dude, but I didn't see him anywhere.

Snap went in the bathroom and found there was a crap game going on. That's where Shrimp was, playing dice with some other dudes. I went in the bathroom and walked to where he was down on the floor with the dice. I stood over him and said, "What does Dee Dee mean to you?" He didn't answer until he had stood all the way up on both feet, and then I knew why they called him Shrimp. This nigger was two times bigger than me. He said, "She's my woman. What's it to you, nigger?" I couldn't cop out. I didn't say anything, just fired my right hand hard as I could up side his head. That made him back up. Then he yelled and run right to me with his head down, trying to get me around the legs, but I went to one side and got him with a foot in the face. That downed him, and Snap and I walked all over him with our feet.

I went out into the rec room and took Dee Dee by the arm. When we was out the door, I smacked her up side the head. I was giving her hell for messing around on me; she was crying and telling me she was sorry.

Then Dee Dee and I took the shortcut home through the woods. I was telling her she wasn't my woman no more, and she was still crying. About halfway in the woods we just stopped and looked at each other. She knew I didn't really want to put her down, and I don't think she wanted to cut me back neither. The next thing I know we were kissing, and of course the kissing led to sex—we were rolling in the grass, and I had forgiven her for everything. Night came fast and I had to get her home, but I didn't get her home fast enough. When she got there, her mother was waiting for her, and she couldn't explain why she was late or how she had got grass on her coat. So she told her mother what had
happened. Then her mother called the man and changed the whole thing around.

I hadn't given it any thought after getting home—I just went up on the corner with the fellows when a dude came by and said the police was in the shopping center looking for me. The next thing I know there were two big white men standing behind me asking was my name John Allen. I said, "Yeah." They took me to the car while I was asking what I had done. They said, "Don't play with us, little nigger. You know what you done." I didn't say nothing else to them. They took me to the station, and my mother and grandmother came down and asked me what was up. I said I didn't know. Then all of a sudden Dee Dee and her mother came in. I couldn't believe my eyes. Her mother was talking, but the police dick told her to let Dee Dee tell what had happened.

Dee Dee wouldn't talk for a long time until finally the man said, "Put him in the back in a cell." I wasn't saying anything, but I was pleading with her with my eyes. She said, "No! Don't put him in no cell! He hasn't done anything I didn't let him do." Man, was I glad to hear that! She told the whole truth, so the rollers let me go home that night, but I had to go to court. I just knew that I was going to jail no matter what Dee Dee had told them, but it was the first time justice had smiled on me—I got probation. I thought that was really something.

My next beef with the law came when I was seventeen, and it was behind my woman Ann. Ann have three kids by me, but at this time she only had my first kid, Cynthia. Here's what went down. At the time, I had stopped going to school and was working at night. I was really trying hard to do right because I loved Ann and the baby. I was still hanging out with the fellows and drinking and smoking reefers, but not as much as before.

I was in love! Ann wasn't the only girl that had a kid by me, but she was the one that I loved. I had other girls even then. There was Sharon, who was pregnant at the time, and also this girl named Mary Lou. Mary Lou lived in Arlington on South Queen Street, come from a good family who owned their own home and all that. I really couldn't get over there much. I think Ann living next door to me played a large part in me caring for her and the kid so much. They was always around. Another thing. Whenever I got in trouble—and I must have been picked up one million times I know for one thing and another—Ann was always there. Even though at that particular time she was young and she really couldn't do anything, she would always be with my mother.

Even in them old days—gang-fight days and the smoking herb and drinking wine and fighting and stealing—through all that Ann stuck with me. She didn't always know why. So I just chalked it up to she cared something about me. Whenever I was in trouble, she came. None of the other girls that I had pregnant at that particular time came to my aid or wrote me a letter or anything, so it just automatically made me closer to Ann. Ann seemed to understand a lot of things about me—maybe she seen some good in me that nobody else seen. Exactly what I don't know.

Ann was real quiet, and even though we had a lot of fun together, I think she appreciated me more and I appreciated her more when we was by ourselves, not in the parties or the dances. Every now and then she'd have to fight to regain me or to let everybody else know that I was her man. Her friend Sharon had a kid by me, and she also had a friend named Judy Mitchell, who didn't have a kid by me but was my girl at that particular time. Anyhow, Sharon and Judy decided to jump on Ann. Ann whupped both of them. If you see Ann, then you know why. She never was a slouch, a sucker. She could rumble. She could take care of herself.

On the other hand, she was real passionate and affectionate. She gave me the affection that I felt I needed at that age and stage of life. She also was pretty smart in school. I
remember she was in the seventh grade and I was in about
the ninth. She used to do all my work all the time.

She always been able. She could cook when she was
young; when she was ten or eleven years old, she could cook
very well. She used to fix dinner for her family. Believe me,
she had a big family. She’s not no beauty queen, but in her
young days she had a pretty old foxy shape that I used to
like. I used to love to see her with her ponytail and with
some white Bermuda shorts she used to wear all the time.
They used to knock me right out. All I wanted to do was
carry her in the bushes right away.

The vibes between us were really beautiful, and they still
are, to a certain extent. I always been somewhat of a tomcat,
but I never forget where home is, so we never really been
completely erased from each other.

Anyway, back when I was seventeen, she was my main
gal and had just had my oldest daughter, Cynthia. At this
time there was a couple of bad niggers named Rock and
B.K., who had a gang with some bad dudes in it. They were
a little older than me and my gang, so that’s why we never
had a run-in before. What was happening was th’ Rock and
B.K. had a lot of people scared of them, and they knew it.
So they start telling the girls that if they didn’t do what
Rock and B.K. wanted them to, Rock and B.K. would whip
them up or whip up their father or brother or boyfriend.
Most of the girls were scared, if not for theirselves, then for
their family or boyfriend, so they did what Rock and B.K.
wanted them to. Once they had a girl scared enough, they
would make her meet them somewhere, then they would get
her drunk, and then Rock and B.K. and all their boys would
have sex with her. That’s called a gang bang, or pulling a G.

One day I was down on the corner before going to
work, and two of my boys came running up to me. They
said, “Man, something got to be done about Rock and B.K.”
They was both mad as hell, ’cause Rock and B.K. and their
gang had got to their girls. Then they told me they had got

the wire that my woman was next. At first I didn’t believe
them. I thought they were just telling me this ’cause they
were scared and they knew that I would do something.
Then one of them said, “I ain’t jiving, man. That is the wire
I got from one of Rock’s boys.”

I was mad as hell. I said to myself, “This can’t be happen-
ing to me, not me, and I’m not going to let it happen to my
woman.” I told my boys to get all the fellows together and
let them know that we would more than likely be going to
war with Rock and his gang some time that night. They said,
“Solid.”

I didn’t know what to do, how to stop those two bad
niggers. I wasn’t scared. I knew I could whip Rock, though
I wasn’t sure about B.K. I went home and told Ann when
I get on the bus to go to work, for her not to come out of
the house for anything.

Now, the week before we had got in a fight with a roller,
and we had took his gun. Snap had it, so I went to his house,
told him what was up, got the gun, and told him to meet me
on the playground at dark. Then I get on the bus just like
I always do. My boys was on the corner, and when I looked
out the other side there was Rock and B.K. and their gang
on the other corner. I stayed on the bus till it got to the end
of the line, then I got on the next bus coming back. I knew
it would be dark by the time I got back. I didn’t get off
where I usually do. I got off at the stop before that and
walked to the playground, where Snap was waiting for me.
I asked him if anything had happened. He said, “No, man,
not yet.” From where we was we could see up and down the
street both ways.

We were sitting and looking about an hour later, when
I saw someone at Ann’s back door. I told Snap, “Here it is.
Let’s walk.” We went across the street and in her front door.
Ann was standing at the back door, and I heard her say,
“Tell Rock that I’m not coming nowhere.” When I heard
this, all I could see was red. I pulled her out of the door to
bullets out and ran down the street. Snap saved me from a murder charge because I'm sure I was going to down Rock. I was going to take him all the way out.

As we went up the street, Snap was saying, "We got to get out of town." I walked to Ann's house and told her what had happened. Then I went up to our room to look out the window. I had some more guns, so I put them on the bed, 'cause I was planning to shoot it out with the rollers. But Ann's mother came up and said, "Son, please don't do that with your kid in here." The rollers were already running all around the back door and at the side and front of the house. Ann's mother was crying and crying, so I said, "Okay, okay," and I put all the guns away and walked next door to my house.

Now, even though I was seventeen at the time, I could have passed for thirteen 'cause I was so small for my age. The police all around the house didn't even suspect who I was. So when I come in my house, the police have my grandfather, 'cause him and I have the same name. My grandfather was saying, "Let me go, let me go. I haven't shot anyone in years." So I just went straight through to the kitchen, got a glass of water, drunk the water, went upstairs to the bathroom, came back down the steps, and told one of the white-shirts—one of the police—a lieutenant—that I was John Allen. And that was it.

Before Ann's mother talked to me, I had felt like shooting it out with the rollers was the thing to do, that I wasn't supposed to just give up. I knew that I was going to lose, but I figured, take as many with me as I could. If it wasn't for Ann's mother bringing up the fact about the child, I probably would have had Ann load and I would have been doing it. I think it was kind of expected of me that if they got me by killing me or capturing me or shooting me, it would have been a whole lot better.

The police knew who to look for 'cause Rock told them who shot him, but when we go to court, he wouldn't press no charge. But the government had to press charges because
I had pleaded guilty anyway. So it wasn't very hard. I had no case. They tried to make me sign some old thing. I said, "Man, I can't read or write." So the dude say, "Just sign right here. You can write your name, can't you?" I said, "No. I can't write, man." Because I knew I wasn't supposed to say nothing. I wasn't supposed to sign nothing. But I think that I was so mad and so confused that I just didn't care what I said. At that particular moment it didn't make no difference. It was just, "Yeah, I shot him. So what?"

So I was taken to the receiving home, where I stayed for three days. Then they waived jurisdiction on me, and I was sent to the D.C. Jail. When it came court time, I pleaded guilty to A.D.W. [assault with a deadly weapon] and was sentenced to six years under the Youth Act.

Out of the six years I got on the A.D.W. charge, I did almost three. I was sent to the Youth Center. On one side of the Youth Center is Lorton, where dudes go when they're convicted of serious charges, and on the other side is Occoquan, which is a rehabilitation center for alcoholics and for misdemeanor charges. Lorton is on kind of a hill, and the Youth Center is in a valley.

I learned quite a few things at the Youth Center that I didn't learn at Junior Village. One of the most important things I learned there was a trade. That was cooking. I had two or three certificates or diplomas to that effect at one time, though I've misplaced them since. When I was at the Youth Center, I worked my way up from plain kitchen helper to first cook and instructor. I taught other guys how to cook. That was one of the good things I learned there.

Of course, I learned a lot of other things, too, like how to stick for a guy while he took his thing—in other words, pickpocket. I learned that pretty good while I was at the Youth Center, but I never did put it into practice when I was in the street 'cause it just wasn't my game. I think one of the main things I learned at the Youth Center was unity—that you can get a lot more when you stick together. I realized it then behind a sort of riot that went down. We organized and stayed united, stayed together, and eventually we lost the battle, but our grievances was heard and publicized.

I was one of the few dudes that came to the Youth Center when it was just a couple of months old. It had opened up in September '60, and I must have gotten there around December. Before the Youth Center was built, whenever a dude from the District received a youth correctional act, then he was always sent to Ashland, Kentucky, which is a youth joint under federal control. At the time I got my youth act charge, you could get sent to any federal institution at all from Ashland, Kentucky, to Atlanta, Georgia, if they thought it was necessary. But by me getting into the new Youth Center close to home, I found that I knew most of the people who came in there.

The living arrangements at the Youth Center was really hip. You had your own room, not a cell. Each individual inmate had his own room. Each individual inmate was responsible for cleaning his room, having his room free of anything that the institution might consider as contraband. But he has his own room and not only that, but a key to the door of the room. Naturally the dormitory officer also had a key to all the doors, because they made a day-to-day inspection of the rooms.

At first, the educational program at the Youth Center was a thing like if you wanted to go to school, then you could go; and if you didn't want to go, then you didn't have to go. Everybody always got a job or some kind of work to do, so if you didn't go to school, then you just worked on your job. Then around the beginning of '62, it became mandatory to go to school a certain amount of days—in order to get educated, I guess. Anybody that refused, then he would have to work longer hours on whatever job he had.
That didn't last long because a lot of dudes that didn't want to go to school simply went because they didn't want to do the extra work. So the few dudes that wanted to go to school and get their education was being disturbed by the others. I even did it once or twice myself at that particular time. One of my favorite tricks to disturb the group therapy class was to tell everybody before the class would begin that once we got in, nobody should say anything.

So eventually the people running the joint said, "Well, there's some guys who want to learn and some guys who don't. So what we'll do, we'll give them their own choicé, and we won't press that work thing." That's the way it ended up and guess what? I ended up going to school after work myself eventually three days out of a week. I even learned a few things. In fact, I ended up getting—they called the school Valley Central High—a diploma for my hard working efforts. Solid.

The Youth Center wasn't like most of the institutions that I've been in and out of, because at the Youth Center, there was always something going, not only illegal things but mostly good things, like sports. The Youth Center had a boxing team, which was the best boxing team in the Golden Gloves for about three or four years. They also had a pretty good football team and a good basketball team, 'cause most of the youths was very interested in sports. So after work in the evening, there was always plenty to do besides just sitting around watching T.V. I myself in the beginning did quite a bit of boxing, and I played football and things of this nature.

Now, one of the programs that they also offered was for guys that really wasn't good enough to make the varsity teams. They had this thing they called the intramural teams. When I came back to the Youth Center in '63 on another charge, I began to train other younger guys. By me being a repeater at that time gave me a little more status than the new guys coming in. I had twelve guys that I used to train for boxing. I was pretty proud of them because seven out of the twelve did receive trophies in their weight class as being champions in intramural boxing. Other than that boxing team and a softball team I had, which didn't do too well, I also had a basketball team, which actually won the intramural championship one year.

Now, they also had special days—in school I think we called it May Day—when we had track and field events. We would sometimes actually challenge some of the smaller college or high school runners to have track and field events. We had a lot of fun with the things we did, one of which was greasing up a pig and catching it. The first year that they tried it, it wasn't too hip. They greased up a pig and put him on the field, and there's about 150 guys out there, and they was told, "Whoever catch the pig get a carton of cigarettes." I felt sorry for the pig. Can you imagine 150 guys coming after a pig, and the pig so scared he just couldn't run? So bam! everybody was scrambling for him. That didn't end up too good for the pig, 'cause he was crushed and so was a couple of the guys. The next year they changed it around and made a little pen. Then they brought in six or seven pigs and greased up one at a time, and that was a lot of fun.

All in all, sports was time-consuming at the Youth Center. It took up a lot of free time that otherwise you'd spend sitting around thinking about devious things to do. It was something to keep your mind off of everything else.

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When I got out of the Youth Center in '62, I was wilder than ever. I felt that when I got the youth act charge for shooting Rock, I didn't deserve it. I felt that on the night I shot Rock, I was completely right and he was completely wrong, that the eight or nine guys with him was wrong, and if I hadn't have shot him, I probably would have ended up in the hospi-
tal. I felt that it was self-defense. Also, when Rock tried to do what he did, this was outright disrespect not only to Ann but more so to me, 'cause I was her man and you're not supposed to disrespect a man and his woman.

So when I came out of the Youth Center, I didn't try to control myself. I felt that during that time I spent there, I had really missed something, and at that time I wasn't aware of the fact that once time has passed, you never can get that time back. Like things will never be like they was in '62 or like they was five years ago or last month or yesterday. At that particular time, I felt that I had been missing out and I was just playing what you call "catch-up," trying to do everything. Not only on the streets and running with the dudes but also with the young ladies. I think that lasted about two weeks, and I was ready to quit them altogether. I was just trying to relive the time that I was away. My parole officer was pressing me for not working, but I didn't care.

It was about this time that I started to get tight with my father. He was just getting out of Lorton, and he was more like a very good friend than a father. When I was very young, my father still had some type of relationship with my mother, coming around every now and then. As I got older, once or twice when my mother and I was together, she would actually point my father out to me. Then getting even older, I approached my father and let him know who I was. I didn't see him too much after that, but I was aware that this was my father and he was aware that I was his son. Still, when I was a kid, sometimes I didn't see my father for years at a time.

My mother never did get into that bag about "Your father ain't no good" or "Your father left me." She never did down my father to me. I honestly believe that she cared a whole lot about him. I never told her this. It was just my own little personal opinion. The one that did down my father to me often was my grandmother. She didn't care for him one bit.

When I did finally get to know him, I found out he was a real good dude. He never treat me like his son; he never treat me like a kid. He always treated me like an adult and like a real good friend. He was flashy, cool, and he had a gift of gab—he could rap, he could really run it down to anybody. He also knew how to speak Spanish fluently and one other language, I forget what it was. He was just an all-around good Joe, a good dude. Me and him used to hang out, get a couple of broods together, and do our thing.

I think what really brought us together was an incident that happened with a dame of his a little while after I got out of the Youth Center in '62. He was going with this dame who was about twenty years old. I was older than her! That dame used to really make me mad 'cause she used to say things like, "You know, me and your father are going to get married." And I say, "Yeah? Solid. I don't see what he want to marry you for." Then several times the broad actually tried to seduce me. I told my father about it. I said, "Man, that dame ain't nothing." But he was kind of hopped up over her, maybe because he was around forty-something and, of course, she was so much younger.

On this particular occasion when the dame caused a lot of trouble, a friend of my father's showed up from Lorton, another musician that he know for quite some time. Well, he's showing the dude around and showing him a good time. Some way they end up back at his house, where the dude attempted to rape the broad.

Of course, my father wanted to get revenge on the dude, so naturally he came looking for me. It was one of them times when I had been out in the streets for two or three days on a gambling thing. I never been no hell of a gambler, but I used to do a lot of betting. I knew friends of mine that was really, really swift with dice, and I would bet on them cause I knew they was going to win. So this time I was coming home to bed, really tired, when I hear my father coming in. "Man, this nigger done raped my woman. We got to do this and we got to do that." His cousin Charles was
locked up, and Charles had all his guns and things. So he asked me for something. I go upstairs and stack all the guns and stuff on the bed. What he picked was a shotgun, but the shotgun he picked is my favorite shotgun—a little sawed-off shotgun. So I tell him, I say, "I know you want to handle this by yourself, but wherever the shotgun go, I go."

So he picked up an old pistol and stuck it in his belt, and I break the shotgun down and put it in my belt. Me and him get the dude. We didn't down him, but we paid him back. But it only made me hate the broad even more, 'cause I figure she enticed the dude one way or the other. I don't think the dude would have done it on his own.

I never resented my father. In fact, I kind of admired him; I dug his style. My brother Rodney is just like him—he look like him, act like him, he even plays bongos. Rodney is my father's son, not my mother's. Knowing my father, he probably had more children than Rodney and me, but I never came in contact with them. I guess Rodney and I were just the cream of the crop for him. His main two.

Rodney lived with his aunt, and when we were kids, I knew much more than he did about street life, hustling life. All Rodney knew was go to school, try to be a good boy, and pay his protection regular to whoever he was paying protection to at that particular time. Of course, all that ceased once he found out that he was my brother.

There was a big difference between Rodney and me all the way up 'cause I was raised in the streets and he went to military school. The aunt that he lived with was not what you'd call rich, but she wasn't doing bad, and I guess she thought that this would be the best thing for him. Nobody in my neighborhood knew nothing about military schools, so Rodney had a pretty different life growing up.

The last time I saw Rodney was in '69, and it seemed to me he was into some pretty funny things. We rapped for a while, but then I never got to see him again. Once after I was hurt and transferred to the District jail, he did make an attempt to come see me, but he didn't know the proper identification, so they didn't let him in.

There was a young nurse on Lockward 44 North, where I stayed for a while after getting shot, who lived in the same neighborhood as Rodney. She used to tell me quite a few things about him, and the things that she was telling me wasn't too pleasant. Evidently he was having some pretty bad problems—money and all—and by him maybe not having the heart to pick up a pistol and get into stickup, he ended up in small-time hustling, living a kind of hippie-style life, from what I understand, which was a surprise to me, because the people that he lived with, they were well off. Aside from that news I got from the nurse, though, I haven't seen or heard from him in quite some time.

But we did have some good times together with my father back around '63. I remember one time when me and Ann and Rodney and his broad and my father and his old lady all got together and partied all day and all night. At one point, my father got his head back and he had a little thing he used to do just like Cagney. He would say, "You my big drink of water" to me and "You my little drink of water" to Rodney. We got to kidding around, so I told my brother, "Man, are you going to let that old dude talk to you like that? You had better straighten it up. I'm agitating him and getting them into it. They get to rassling and tussling, my old man kind of down rassling behind the couch.

So I'm laughing, I'm cracking up, it's getting to me. And then my old man say, "I'm ready for you, big drink of water." I immediately hit him with the coffee table. I came out on top, and I never let him forget it. I used to press him about it. I say, "Man, you're getting too old. You can't whup me now. I'm the youngest. I'm the strongest. You know you have to come and get me when somebody jumps on you."

We used to have a lot of fun playing around that way. Nobody ever got seriously hurt—just bumps and bruises, swollen eyes, nose bleeding a little. After the rumble, we set
down and kind of straightened up the mess, cleaned up the

glass, then continued to party. I think it brought us a little
closer together.

There was only one time that my father made me really
mad, and that was when he called my mother a bitch. I didn't
feel that he had the right to call her a bitch because she had
done everything for me and he did nothing. Like he called for
me and I wasn't at home, so my mother said, "Now why

after all these years you want him? Why you didn't want to

be around him before?" I don't know what his answer was,

but I know he ended up cussing at her. She was pretty upset

when I came home, and she told me about it. I got kind of

mad, and went to see him. It's funny, he must have felt that

I was gonna come; he must have known he was really

wrong. Even in that short time he knew me well enough to

know that I was going to do something about it, because I

really love Moms.

I came down to my father's house with a shotgun ready
to do him in, and he was waiting for me with a shotgun.
When I came in, we kind of looked at each other for a while,
and I said, "You ain't have to call her a bitch." So he says
something like "Well, I'm your father." But I said, "Look at
all them many years. Maybe you are my father, but you

only had the title 'cause you never did anything else." So
then he thought about it and we just looking at each other

awhile. Finally he kind of laid his shotgun against the wall,

and I relaxed a little. We didn't really say anything, and then

he just ran to me. At first I was on the offensive, 'cause when

he started to me, I jerked my shotgun up. But you know

how you can tell on somebody's face what they're about the

business of doing. Just a few steps before he got to me I

knew it wasn't no violent move. He just threw his arms

around me and started crying. That kind of got to me. Then

I walked away a little bit with my head down, saying, "Now,

man, just don't do it no more." That was a pretty serious

thing, but it was the only real problem we ever had.

After we became friends, then I saw him regularly. I saw

him as often as I could. I've always considered myself a man

ever since I was about thirteen, but I was pretty much a man

age-wise when him and I became really good friends. I used

to stop by his joint, and him and I'd get smashed together.

A lot of times we'd have dames together. I remember one
time when I was around twenty-three he called me and told

me a friend of his had come into town. The friend of his was

an old girlfriend, and she had brought another friend with

her. Why he didn't call one of his buddies I don't know. But

I guess he just wanted to show his son off.

I knew that they came down for a good time, to go

places and of course be with a man, so immediately the

broad asked me how old I was. I told her, and she says

something like, "Well, I'm ten years older than you." I said,

"Yeah, like what difference does it make in the bedroom in

the bed with the lights out and our clothes off?" It worked

out all right.

A similar thing happened when I was fifteen or sixteen

and my father lived on South Capitol Street S.W., which

was right across the bridge that leaves from S.W. to S.E. We

were seeing each other every now and then at that time.

There was a cabaret-style place up at 14th and U, where

my father was fixing to play one night. Being a musician, he
got around to a lot of these type places. Now, there's a

young girl there about eighteen, and her mother is the one

who's sponsoring the affair. She's sitting around drinking a

beer. I think I got a pop or something 'cause I don't like no

beer. So the music playing, and the young girl and my father

got to dancing. Then my old man say, "You want to dance

with this dame?" So I say, "No, I don't do no dancing." Then

they sat down at the table, and the broad says something like

"Who is this?" So my father says, "That's my son. His name

is John." Then she say, "Well, when your father come up

here to play tonight with the band, who gonna babysit for

you?" That blow my stack. So I say, "Why don't you come
to babysit for me? Then I'll show you how much baby I really am." Then my father went on to explain to her: "Johnny, he small and he young, but he kind of fast, and he usually hang with a different crowd from other dudes his age." But the broad continued to laugh, and I continued to get mad.

The next afternoon he called and said, "Come down as soon as possible. I want to show you something." So I got there in the evening. He live above a little store. I walk in, and he just blase and setting around the house in his underwe, being comfortable. Then he say, "Go look in the bedroom." And sure enough there's that dame, the same one. So I immediately begin to take off my clothes, cause I want her to see that I'm just as much man as anyone that she knows. When she sees me, she protests to my father. "What you doing? This little boy this and this little boy that." My father started laughing and closed the door, and I handled it from there. I really changed her mind, cause when she left there, she gave me her address and phone number and all that, but I wasn't really interested. I just had to prove to her that I was somebody.

I liked my father, and I respected him because he was my father, but I can't say I was proud of him. The man that I was proud of was my grandfather, my mother's father. He was my pride. My father's part of the family I had very very little contact with at all. For a time, my father lived with his mother, who was also my grandmother, but we didn't have what you'd call a close relationship. I knew that she was my father's mother simply because he told me, but right now if she came to see me, unless she told me who she was, I wouldn't know her. I don't even know her name.

It was through my mother's family that I first found out my father was on heroin. My grandmother would say to me, "Boy, if you keep on going the way you're going, you're going to be just like your father—a dirty dope fiend." So I begin to investigate, check out little things that he did to see

if he really was using drugs. One time when I was fifteen or sixteen I actually seen him use drugs. He was tying himself up, and he was saying, "Boy, as long as you live, don't you ever do this right here." And he was shooting the heroin on in at the same time. "Remember what I say, boy." And his voice changed.

I kind of blame heroin for all the years he neglected me. I felt that he could have done much, much better as a musician or as anything that he wanted to be without the heroin, that he would have been a much better man, a much better father. I say he neglected me for all these years because he used dope, or he was in and out of jail because he used dope, or he lost his status as a good musician because he used dope. Everything that he did, instead of blaming him, I blamed on the dope.

My father died when I was twenty-three years of age. I was in the D.C. Jail at the time, and one evening when I was laying in my cell, I got word that I had a visitor. So I go down to the visiting hall. I see it's my mother through the glass, so I pick up the phone and she begin to tell me. She asked me had I heard about my father, and I said no. Well, the first thing come to my mind was that he had some kind of beef or a charge. When she told me he was dead, I don't think I really accepted it right off. I think it got to me more later, after I went back to my cell and I lay down on my bunk. I thought about all the years him and I never really had together, and I thought about them last few months that we were spending together and how much I really did dig the dude. I felt pretty bad about it. I often think of him now and wish that he was around.

I don't know exactly what he died from, but my suspicions are that he died from an overdose of heroin. The last few months him and I had been talking and being together quite a bit. He didn't show any signs of being back on heroin, because him and I used to do a lot of drinking, and a heroin user don't mess with a whole lot of alcohol. But
when he died it was Christmas Eve, and I was told that an old friend of his had visited him, one of his old friends that was still about the business of selling narcotics. I think maybe that him and his old friend got together and got high, and by him being off of drugs for so long, it was just too much for him. But that's just my opinion. I don't really know. At the time he died, he was between forty-seven and forty-nine years old.

6

Cops and Robbers

In '64, I got involved in another beef, which was assault on a police. What went down was this. One night me and my boys was hanging around a little spot called Jiffy's Carry-Out. We was doing our usual thing—drinking wine and smoking a little herb—when three of the younger dudes decided to go to the all-night drugstore right around the corner on Alabama Avenue. From what I understand from them, they didn't go in there with the intent to rob or beat anybody up or anything. I think they only really wanted to buy some gum and cigarettes, but by being drunk, they was talking pretty tough, and so the lady behind the counter automatically get scared. Any lady probably would if three teenagers came in looking and talking tough, and smelling like wine. In getting scared, the lady immediately go to get the druggist, but it turned out for the worse, 'cause the druggist couldn't handle the dudes at all. Evidently he got a little pushy or ordered them out of the store, and by them being all fired up, naturally the next thing they did was jump on him.

So now what do you have? You've got a drugstore. You've got a scared lady in the corner somewhere with her hands over her face. You've got a beat-up druggist laying on the floor. You've got three dudes that came in for chewing gum and cigarettes, but now they got two cash registers. So what do they do? They takes the cash. Wasn't nothing to