**PREP SCHOOL GANGSTER**

**By Easton Blake**

**A Memoir**

Chapter 1

I'm sixteen years old and I don't give a fuck about anything except pussy and smoking pot. Sixteen is a great time to be alive, especially in Manhattan. My destination for the evening is the Marriot Marquis, a famous hotel in Times Square full to the brim with young dumb tourist girls. It's my opinion that girls are easy when they're on vacation, no ties or school friends the next day to call them sluts, just temporary dick. I am that temporary dick -- wearing blue jeans with a white t-shirt, smoking a joint on my roof in uptown Manhattan, ready to wreak havoc.

High as hell, I get on the subway at 103rd. I have school tomorrow but who gives a fuck. The train hurtles toward the center of the city. I'm spat out by sliding doors. I stagger onto some kind of subterranean platform and move with the crowd of tourists and thieves. We ascend as a group to the heart of Times Square. In the sky are flashing billboards, in the distance, The Marriot.

The hotel has glass elevators. As I rise to the eighth floor lobby, it feels like I'm on my way to another planet. The lobby's covered with marble, there's an open-air dining room and a bar with a large clock hanging overhead. The hotel is enormous, forty-five floors and nine different elevators. There's more than enough room for debauchery somewhere and I intend to find it.

I sit on one of the lobby couches, breathing in the atmosphere. I’m enjoying my high. I pay special attention to the wives of rich brokers. They walk by in dresses that highlight their tits. The click of their heels on the polished floors sounds like the hooves of thoroughbreds. They remind me of manicured mares that have abandoned the race track, settling for a life of luxury in their husbands’ stables. I'm looking for something a bit younger, more vulnerable, ideally a teenage girl on a trip to New York with her family -- seeking adventure, so bored to tears with watching TV with her little brother that she ventures out alone into the depths of the vast hotel.

I move to the dining area and order a coke from the bar. My lips are dry; I have cotton mouth from the weed I smoked. It was some good shit, California bud -- the kind that comes in glass vials with clever names like "sour diesel" or "purple haze." Waiting for my drink I spot the girls sitting at a table. There are two of them, both blonde, both no more than sixteen. One of them is quite attractive, her breasts impressively round. The other girl is plain looking. I get the sense that she'd rather have the wand of a wizard in her hand than anything I could offer. I catch them taking glances at me, whispering and giggling, a sure sign that at least one of them might be willing.

I get my coke, my fingers tapping on the granite surface of the bar as I look at the girls and smile. I walk over to their table and introduce myself. They're cousins, from Ohio or San Diego or some other insignificant place like that. I lie about my name. I say that my family's staying in the hotel too. Lying to women has always turned me on; it's so easy to do. I swear I could convince a girl that I'm the illegitimate son of Bill Clinton. All you need is good teeth and a straight face and you can get away with anything. I quickly confirm that the more developed cousin is the sluttier of the two blondes; like me, she has hungry eyes. The other chick is just nervously playing along.

I know the hotel like the back of my hand. I convince them to do a little exploring with me. The nerdy cousin reluctantly agrees; it takes some convincing by her hornier counterpart.

We walk to the elevators making light conversation about their asshole hometown.

They tell me they went on a cruise together, I'm hoping they went cock hunting on the cruise as well. The elevators are crowded with tourists making their way up to the hotel's rotating roof restaurant, "The View." I take the girls to the twenty-third floor. There's a little indoor balcony there with chairs and big glass windows that give you a real Tokyo-like view of Times Square. Down below the streets are busy with people scoring pills and prostitutes for the same price. The girls are enthralled with the view. They start to giggle and whisper to each other again. They're probably nervous. They know that we've reached the zero hour where I either make a move or we spend the rest of the evening acting like little schoolgirl chums, sharing our dreams and all that bullshit.

I can tell that I have a prospect with the well endowed cousin. She's staring at me with that lusty cat look that girls give you when they've had too much to drink and their defenses are stripped away. Except she hasn't drunk a lick, she's just a ho. So I concentrate on getting rid of her annoying straight-laced relative. I tell her some crap story about how my uncle should be waiting for me in the lobby and I need her to go see if he's there yet. I give her some vague description but basically I tell her to scram. This will put the other blonde to the test. If she stays while her amiga goes on some obvious fool’s errand for me, then she's game.

Halle-fuckin-lujah, the nerdy chick leaves. I’m alone with the girl. She’s wearing a black dress, black stockings and high heels. Her face is okay, typical blonde haired, blue eyed American girl wearing too much makeup and babbling about dumb shit that makes no difference to my life. We're polar opposites: she's wholesome, Christian, healthy. I'm a dark haired, dark eyed, Jewish bastard high on ganja, eager to sin. Well, we do have that one thing in common.

I kiss her. She's horrible with her tongue, I move my hand to her breasts. They're nice. I suck on her neck and she's breathing heavily. I get my hand between her legs, slide her panties aside and start fingering her. Young girls man, they get so fucking wet. She's lying on her back; I take her hand and put it on my dick which is hard as a rock under my jeans. I tell her I want her to suck it. She makes some small protest, "No I shouldn't; my cousin is gonna be back soon." I take my cock out of my jeans and bring it to her face, still fingering her. She's moaning and in a minute she's on her knees. She's sucking me and I'm on the top of the world, staring out at the city, getting a blowjob from a random hot blonde. Blazed out of my mind, what more could I ask for? She's deepthroating and suddenly I see the reflection of her cousin in the window. She's standing a couple of yards back, watching, and now I completely lose what’s left of my mind. I stare in the window at the reflection of her cousin who's watching my cock get sucked. When I cum I look directly into the cousin’s eyes. My pants are around my ankles.

The blonde I’m with notices her cousin walking toward us and panics. She tells me to pretend we're just kissing. I shake my head. “Hell no,” I answer. I'm not kissing you with my babies dripping down your chin. Her cousin sits down with us staring at her counterpart’s face. I’m thinking I better get the fuck out of here because this is just too awkward. Plus I just blew my load and I'm ready for a cigarette, a Marlboro Menthol Light. She starts to question me because she didn't see any uncle matching the description I gave her in the lobby. She asks me what room I'm staying in and I'm thinking the jig is up and it's time for me to bolt. My new best friend looks like she's having a nervous breakdown, smiling and trying to make the best of the muck on her cheeks. I tell the girls that I better go look for my uncle myself and leave them to discuss the gooey substance driving a wedge between them. I stand up, pull up my jeans, buckle my belt and bid them farewell. Walking down the hallway to the elevators I look back. My partner in crime has her hands outstretched, pleading with her straight edged cousin to understand. What the fuck is there to explain? You just gave brain to a kid on a horse with no name.

I escape from the hotel, giving the security guards a grin. I bring a cigarette to my lips and set it on fire -- standing still for a moment, saving the memory. This is the kind of thing you tell your grandkids about.

I head uptown toward the train station at 50th. Outside of the station are two strange men. One of them is short with frazzled gray hair. The other is younger, dangerous looking. Before I can descend to the train the men start to talk to me. "How was your night?" asks the old man, puffing on a cigarette. "You have no idea," I reply, smiling, proud of my conquest. "I can imagine," says the dangerous one. "Don't you have school tomorrow?" I nod and they laugh. Eventually our conversation veers towards drinking. We discuss Jack Daniels. Both of the men reminisce a bit about their younger years. From what I can tell each of them was a wild child like me. I'm enjoying this walk down memory lane but it's getting late.

As I'm about to leave they start preaching the gospel. This wasn't the first time I had heard shady characters quoting the bible -- it's not an uncommon thing in New York. But when they appear right up front to be criminals it's rather disconcerting. Don't get me wrong, I'm not one of those morons who believe that just because you're saved you’re some sort of righteous person. Take the Son of Sam, otherwise known as David Berkowitz. A nice Jewish boy from the Bronx who found Jesus in prison. He got saved. Now he preaches the gospel with the help of a few ministries. Churches are actually helping get this serial killer’s message to the unbelievers. If we aint in the Apocalypse then I don't know what the fuck is going on.

Chapter 2

There was more to the Marriot than just debauchery. I met the first girl I fell in love with there. I was seventeen years old, spending another night roaming through the Times Square area, alone and desperate for entertainment. My first stop was at a small bodega where I picked up a twenty-two-ounce bottle of Heineken, my drink of choice in high school. The store's owner gave me a look as he passed me the bottle. At that point I hadn't shaved a day in my life. He should never have served me, but the city was different then, sin was on sale to people of all ages. On the street, I drank the brew out of a brown paper bag. The Marriot loomed before me, its rotating roof top restaurant gleaming like some phallic beacon in the night. The hotel looked like something out of the movie "Blade Runner."

As usual, I was horny. I wanted sex, adventure, or a combination. I had dressed well that evening with a red collared polo shirt and my hair gelled up. I was doing my best impression of a pretty boy. I breezed past the security in the lobby and made my way to the elevators. The eighth floor lobby was crowded, long counters of tourists checking in, reserving tickets for shows, cruising the gift shop where you could buy a pack of M&M's for the same price as a nickel bag. I headed for the hotel bar. The prices at the Marriot are ridiculous, but I was in a good mood that night, willing to spend the end of my allowance on a Jack and Coke.

I ordered the drink and sat in a booth with a view of the lobby. With no sign of anything promising, I decided to venture toward the couches by the hotel's check in counter. I sat across from the escalator that takes people up to the ninth floor where there are another set of elevators that travel exclusively to the roof restaurant. That's when I saw her and experienced what Italians like to refer to as a "Colpo di fulmine," a lightning stroke.

She's about five foot seven, long black curly hair, pale skin, and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. She's with her family. They're all chatting away. By some miracle she turns her head and looks at me. She smiles and it's as if every movement in the hotel stops. I'm speechless. Here I was used to visiting the Marriot in order to hook up with some clueless chick and I'm heart struck. We stare at each other. She steps on the escalator that rises towards the ninth floor. I'm watching her climb this escalator; she's looking at me and smiling, and I'm thinking if I don't talk to this girl I'll slit my wrists. So I wave and she does the same, and suddenly she's bounding down the escalator to meet me -- defying gravity. I should have known in that moment that we were destined to crash and burn. For Christ’s sake, she was running down an escalator in the wrong direction.

She walked over to me and said something about my smile. I told her she was beautiful. She invited me to dinner with her family and I accepted. I was hooked. Her family was a strange lot. Her little brother was fourteen; he had a cleft palette and was wearing a very baggy starter jacket. His jeans were baggy as well, about three times too big. He greeted me with a "get the fuck out of my life" nod. He reminded me of   
myself. Her father had a cleft palette too. He was a dark skinned thin Sicilian who sounded like Don Corleone. Her mother was a big busted blonde wearing a tight top; she looked like some kind of Vegas showgirl. She told me to call her Ms. A. Later that night this woman would warn me to never get her daughter pregnant or ask what her father did for a living. Unfortunately, one of these rules I would later violate.

I rode up the escalator with her family. Then we shuffled into one of the nearby elevators that takes diners to the penthouse. We ate dinner while the restaurant rotated, the bay windows looking out upon a dwarfed New York, sparkling yellow lights and empty bridges, slightly blurred by a light rain. I've never felt the way I felt that night for a woman and I won't ever again. We had known each other for an hour and yet we were ready to run away together. Looking back on that evening, we should have. Instead the night ended with her family driving me back uptown in their minivan. As her father pulled over, my graffiti strewn neighborhood seemed particularly desolate. He said they had a long trip back home to New Jersey. I got her phone number, stepped out of the van, and said good night. And that was how I fell in love with Victoria.

Chapter 3

I remember her sweet sixteen; the party was at her family's house in the Garden State. Her family included her father, her mother, her brother, her aunt and her grandparents. Her grandparents loved me. They said I looked like one of their favorite TV characters from the 60's, a guy called Dr. Kildaire. They all lived in the same two-story house. The house was in a poor section of Newark littered with Portuguese wannabe gangsters and low level Italian wiseguys. If Jersey is America's ass, then Newark is its anus.

Her father had done up the house: confetti snowflakes floated down on squawking mechanical painted birds that popped in and out of some cheaply made contraption on the wall. He told me had been an interior designer who had been offered a big job at Macy's but decided against it because his mother thought it would make him look like a fag. Instead he ended up as a low-level mafia bag man, Jersey’s idea of upward mobility.

Victoria looked great in some nice little cotton dress, showing her nice little kneecaps. God damn, that girl was better than pork fried dumplings, Jack and coke, or popcorn at a movie. But not better than an actual movie; no girl is better than a good movie. If you think so you need to get more pussy.

All her friends and close relative were in attendance. It was quite the dysfunctional lot. You had Irene, the gigantic volleyball playing Amazon, who lifted me off my feet and squeezed me against her enormous breasts. There was Victoria's cousin, Christina. She had one blue eye and one brown one and wore impossibly tight ass jeans. She was dating some black kid who her father wanted to whack. And, of course, Victoria's older half brother, Vic. Vic was a brain damaged former thug. He had been injured in a motorcycle accident and had smashed his head on the concrete. He was a good-looking guy, half Italian, half Native American, brown hair, dark eyes, and a baby face. He walked with a limp, and spent most of the party following his little sister around with a camera. Now mind you this was a married man, married with children, and he was following his sixteen-year-old little sister around like some stray dog, incessantly snapping Polaroids of her. He took several with me included.

At one moment, in a dark room decorated with streamers and a rotating disco ball, he introduced himself to me.

"Hey my name's Vic." We shake hands. "I'm Victoria's older brother." We bullshit for a minute or two and then suddenly the conversation takes a sharp turn.

"Have you ever sniffed coke before?" he asks. I shake my head, amused at what a mook this guy is. "You should try it. Man I did it when I was fucking this hooker." I cough, no longer amused. I want to return to the punch bowl, to Victoria, anything to get away from this freak, but he continues. "I was fucking this hooker in a hotel by the city. We was blowing lines together. She came up with this idea, to put the coke on my cock you know. Jesse -- that’s your name right?” I nod, suddenly very uncomfortable. I'm no saint but what kind of a guy introduces himself to his teenaged sister’s boyfriend by recounting a cocaine on your cock story? Vic goes on, “So we put the stuff on my dick, right. Listen to me when I tell you my dick was never harder, I fucked this girl for hours. You put that shit on your dick, it’s like fucking Miracle-Gro. Hey can I take a picture of you?” I nod again, not wanting to be rude. But this guy is freaking me out. It’s not just the strange drug story, it’s the Polaroid camera, the constant picture taking of his little sister. My Spidey sense was tingling. As it turned out my instincts were dead on. A year later when I was in college in Boston, Victoria and I were walking along Revere Beach.

Revere Beach is the last stop on one of Boston’s tram-trolley T lines. It's a little shit beach in a little shit town, but I loved it. It reminded me of Coney Island; a place past its heyday, an ocean beach bordering an urban wasteland full of drunken Irishmen and foolish college kids. It was a cold night. Victoria was leaning on my shoulder. The ocean was pitch black, quiet aside from the soft lapping of some little waves. She looked up at me with those eyes that always seemed so sad and whispered, "I want to tell you something.” What's the first thing I thought of? What every guy thinks of when he hears those words. She’s preggers.

The truth was something much worse, much more sinister, the kind of thing old men in Amsterdam pay to simulate.

Victoria was raped as a child, repeatedly. Her brother Vic raped her. That's right, the disabled Polaroid snapping perv with the cocaine story. She was named after her future rapist. How horribly ironic.

We stop walking. Our shoes sink further into the sand as she recounts the awful memories. The abuse started when Victoria was twelve. Vic used to sneak into her room late at night, her parents asleep. He would use duct tape over her mouth, silencing her. She was raped and sodomized for two years. Not only did he rape her but he involved his pals. Victoria would be forced to give hand jobs to his buddies. A thirteen-year-old girl jerking off some older teenage grease ball as her brother watched. Why didn't she tell her parents? Who the fuck knows. Maybe he convinced her it was normal. Maybe she didn't want to upset the equilibrium, throw a wrench into the happy family myth we all perpetrate during Christmas, New Years, and other pagan holidays. Eventually the abuse stopped, but not because Vic saw the light or was born again a la Son of Sam. No, the fucker crashed his motorbike running from the cops. He crippled himself, wound up walking with a limp and a cane. He also screwed up his brain. Guess he wasn't wearing a helmet. Too bad the cop cruiser didn't run over his skull.

Vic was practically brain dead, but he had been coherent enough to tell me his sick ass stories the night of Victoria's sweet sixteen. He had been coherent enough to follow her around snapping Polaroids, making her feel uncomfortable, reminding her that he was still watching, that they shared a secret. Not a secret anymore.

We walked toward the train station, crossing the lamp lit street, Victoria shivering, leaning on my shoulder, crying softly. There were hardly any people around. Winter was approaching, most of the locals were inside somewhere nursing a beer, their faces flickering blue in the light of a television screen. I was numb; it wasn't the first time or the last that some one had destroyed my fairy tale notion of purity and innocence. Granted, I was no angel, but I thought I was Victoria's first. I could never have imagined something as horrible as her being a childhood sex toy. I had no idea how deeply wounded she was behind that cute little giggle and those puppy dog eyes.

I was the first person she had told about Vic, quite a burden for a high school sweetheart. We rode the T back toward Boston. She was leaving the next day. I wouldn't see her again till Christmas.

Chapter 4

That Christmas, Victoria decided she wanted to have our families meet. We were taking each other quite seriously, as most in long distance relationships do. It's easy to take a person seriously when you barely see their annoying ass.

I was home for break and willing to do whatever I could to make her happy. I had spent most of my first college semester in a severe depression, now that I had broke through to the surface I was enjoying doing the regular corny bullshit we all take for granted. Getting out of bed, taking a shower, not wanting to kill myself. Although with the knowledge of the secrets Victoria had shared with me at Revere Beach about what happened to her right under her parent's noses, I must say I wasn't overly thrilled about spending quality time with them.

Victoria's father had hired a caterer to prepare a whole dinner spread for us. He was obviously invested in this introduction going well. I'm sure Victoria told him that my family had money and he wanted things to work out between us. I doubt that most of Victoria's former boyfriends were college bound, unless they ended up sweeping the floors of Montclair State, taking cigarette breaks to compare their new tattoos.

I was already out at the house in Newark, waiting for my family to join us. I watched as the Perrialis frantically ran around trying to get things in order. Her grandparents were in rare form. Grandma was in a blue nightgown (as usual), a wooden sauce spoon in her hand, screaming random profanity at her little husband Frank. Frank sat in a chair, staring blankly through bottle-cap glasses perched on the ridge of an enormous nose, grunting in response to the familiar attack. Occasionally there were sounds of acquiescence, occasionally derision, it was hard to tell the difference.

Victoria was dressed to the nines. She had high hopes for the evening. She knew my family quite well and had great respect for the success and elegance of my mother. I think it was important to her that her family make a good impression. She was surrounded by a motley crew of Italian lunatics running in circles preparing for the family introduction, but she remained composed, wishing for the best.

The doorbell rang and the Periallis came to order. Grandma put down her sauce spoon. Grandpa ceased grunting. Victoria's father tamped out his cigarette, Victoria's mother pushed out her tits and her brother dropped his game controller and answered the door.

My family filed up the rickety stairs and into the kitchen. Introductions were made, my mother was smiling broadly, but knowing her for years I could sense some disdain for the shack stuck in the 1950s that Victoria called home.

Dinner was largely uneventful. Everyone seemed to be getting along. My mother found Victoria's Grandma endearing, it was hard not to, she was the epitome of the stereotypical Italian Grandma; she could keep any son at home till he was fifty. The only awkward moments during dinner were offered by Victoria's mother; she was just flat out strange. She was a former alcoholic who laughed a bit too hard, spoke a bit too loud, dressed a bit too flashy and stared at people too long. She wasn't outright mad, she just had these moments where she would say something that made the hairs on the back of your neck prick up.

When the evening was coming to a close Victoria seemed relieved. Her dysfunctional family had made it through the introduction without any glaring moments of idiocy. My family was preparing to leave, saying their goodbyes and thank yous when disaster struck.

Victoria's family dog, Baby, was circling the kitchen. Victoria's mom was keeping a nervous eye on the animal. Then, without warning, Baby bounded down the stairs and out the front door onto the street. It looked as if she was trying an escape. Even the pets were trying to get out of this family. Victoria's mother shrieked, "Baby!" and chased after the dog, flying past my parents and down the steps after the dog like a madwoman. We all hurried after her, concerned about the spectacle unfolding before us. The street outside of Victoria's house was slick, it had just finished raining. The dog ran across the road and stopped between some parked cars. "Baby come back," shouted Victoria's mother at the top of her lungs, her breasts heaving, her heels clicking swiftly as she ran across the street in pursuit. And that's when it happened; Ms. A went down for the count. She tripped on her own feet and took a head first dive into the gutter. Her pantyhose tore apart as she lay in a mangled heap. Raising her hand weakly, she looked at my family and managed to get out, "I'm okay." My sister's jaw was nearly on the floor. Victoria's face was bright red. Baby was circling a car and then trotted back towards the house. I guess her job was done. So was the damage to the presentation of normalcy Victoria and her family had worked so hard to put on. But Baby would have none of it. The dog demanded no less from her demented owners than the truth.

Nature has a funny way of not putting up with bullshit. No matter how hard we try, when we're playing make believe we usually end up exposed. Like Ms. A with her ass in the air while the wagging tail of Baby traipsed past her. These revealing episodes come suddenly, and when they do, they're usually cruel.

Chapter 5

My moment of truth was particularly unforgiving. It happened earlier that same year, when I first became aware of the fragile machine beneath my skin; the transition from being a resilient kid to an adult trying to keep the pieces together. Before I was a college freshman the worst that had ever happened to me was a couple of stitches. When I got to Boston all of that changed.

I love Boston. I know I’m a traitor, an asshole. How can I be a New Yorker and blah blah blah. Well if you’re a Yankee fan and you’re thinking that shit you can kiss my ass because the Mets are the authentic grimy New York team, though they suck just as bad as the Jets. Anything in New York that rhymes with "ets" is bad news. Anyways, Boston is cool with me. My Dad is a crazy drunken fucker, perhaps that’s why I feel a kinship with those crazy drunken fuckers -- running through South Boston at two in the morning with their shirts off during the fall, or taking the T to Cambridge to fuck up some Harvard kid. You got to love the Irish. So much energy, ready to fight at the drop of a hat; perhaps if they were getting more sex they might be calmer, they might not need the Red Sox to fill some hole in their lives. But have you seen Irish women? Fuck that. Go Sox!

I lived in a dorm right by the Boston Common. The Common's a large rectangular park that features a statue of George Washington and an eerie little cemetery. Inside the cemetery are buried the bones of patriots, casualties of the Revolutionary War or some shit like that. They’re obsessed with that white boy stuff in New England. You can't go a block without seeing some guy dressed up as Paul Revere, a fake rifle slung over hisshoulder, a can of Bud in his hand. I’ll never understand how Massachusetts is a blue state; Democrats are supposed to be liberal, supposed to be kind. But Boston is the type of place where you can easily get a bottle to the side of the cheek for venturing into the wrong neighborhood.

It was my first time living away from home. I had a bike that I would ride like a madman through the middle of the city's sidewalks. I skipped nearly all of my orientation activities. Who needs to hold hands, sing Kumbaya and play name games? I was too cool for that, a seventeen-year-old Jim Carroll wannabee. I'll never understand why they accepted me to that school. I barely made it out of high school. If I were the dean of that place I would have rejected my punk ass. But then again -- money talks. There are few businesses as lucrative as higher education.

The only orientation event I attended was a cruise with dancing and food. I couldn't resist; I love the sea. I ended up making out with some drunk chick as the boat tooled around Boston Harbor. She told me I was the hottest guy on the boat. I didn't really believe her. Her breath smelled like a brewery.

Class was starting in two days. At this point I had spent nearly a week dodging orientation -- smoking pot, riding my bike, acquainting myself with my new surroundings. One of the locals I met was an Irish mobster type named John. He was small, had a thick Boston accent and dressed impeccably. He was followed everywhere by some young strung out kid from south Boston. I met the two of them in Chinatown in some bar. John offered to take me out to a restaurant and I accepted. I know it was risky, but I've always been subject to a gangster gravitational pull. Aren't we all? How much is made every day exploiting organized crime? I exploited it that evening by feasting on some gourmet Chinese food. It became increasingly apparent that John was queer. His nodding sidekick was probably around for a quick blowjob that would earn the sorry bastard a fix.

The next morning, like an idiot, I met up with the odd couple and we did a bit of sightseeing. I actually got into this criminal's car and took a ride. He kept talking about the Winter Hill Gang and gambling on sports. After the day was done I resolved to stay as far away from them as possible. It was a rush a peering into a Jack Rubyesque lifestyle and living to talk about it but it became quite clear that John wanted to fuck me and that wasn't going to happen. Making the acquaintance was enough; it's good to know muscle wherever you go.

I was a naive college kid. I wasn’t naive in the sense of drugs and liquor, far from it. I smoked my first joint at thirteen, was drunk at ten, partying was old news for me. I just had a habit of seriously endangering myself. I would put my safety at risk in order to make new friends, and do the same for the sake of impressing my old ones. I had a close group of buddies in high school, Mori, Jun, Phil, James and Butler. And I was their court Jester, the entertaining crazy kid willing to do anything for laughs and attention. I’m not sure why I was this way. I mean I was getting plenty of pussy in high school; I even got some ass during college orientation. My best guess is that I had some sort of Napoleon complex. I was very short until I reached seventeen. I had grown into the habit of overcompensating by being a clown. I had the biggest, baddest, toughest motherfuckers for friends, and I was constantly goofing around, pissing off teachers, making kids roll on the floor as if they were, once again, diaper wearing candy sucking little rugrats.

When I got to college this behavior didn't change. One night during those last two days before school I was hanging out with some of the other freshman, smoking some

weed. I had placed rum in a Snapple bottle and mixed it up.

I was getting properly soused. Two of my friends, Taylor and Dana, suggested we take a walk through the Commons. We strolled through the park. Taylor smoked a joint that I had brought from home, kind bud, real sticky icky. I was reaching the point of intoxication where you feel like you’ve become invincible; you forget that your body is fragile, capable of a major fuckup at any given moment. We were walking by the George Washington statue, a thirty-foot concrete mammoth of the first commander in chief on horseback, his saber hanging from his hip, his cap facing Beacon Street, the nearest exit from the park. I wasn't being included in the conversation; Taylor and Dana were discussing some dumb shit, talking about a couple of chicks in our freshman class, whether they were potential lays.

Perhaps it was the combination of the various substances in my blood and the fact that I felt left out. I decided to grab their attention. I stopped walking. Looking up at the statue of old George I said, "I bet you I can climb that statue and sit next to Washington." Before they had a chance to respond, I was scaling the side, working my way up the granite base of the sculpture and onto the legs of the horse. Climbing was easy for me, even in that brain dead state. The guys were cheering me on; I was in my element, completely out of my mind. Living for the laughter of my peers, their acceptance. Why was this so god damn important?

I made it around the back of the horse and was shimmying up its tail. I was straddling a concrete horsetail, twenty-five feet in the air, smashed out of my mind. I was nearly up the tail and onto the horse’s back when I froze.

In a moment of clarity I am suddenly sick with myself. I'm eighteen years old climbing up some statue like a circus monkey for the delight of two strangers who couldn't give a damn about me. They would prove this in a moment.

I freeze and I let myself fall. I let go of the tail, sliding downwards. The cheering of my classmates fades. I am falling. Falling towards the earth with a twenty-two-ounce bottle of Heineken in my backpack. I land on the bottle with a crunch. The bottle doesn't break. My spine does.

Gasping, I try to stand, kneeling and pulling at the air with lungs that seem to have gone still. My friends are standing around me, asking if I'm okay, in shock at the fall they’ve just witnessed. I’m bent over. My lungs won't allow me full breaths, only tiny intakes of oxygen, the only thing keeping me from passing out. The pain is excruciating. They walk me back towards our dorm; I struggle to breathe the entire way. I don't know how I manage to make it back. Perhaps the liquor and weed keep me from realizing the full extent of my injury. They take me to my dorm room and leave me there. They leave a drunken schoolmate who has just fallen thirty feet onto a bottle. They leave an eighteen-year-old kid struggling to breathe, on the verge of death. Bastards, you can't trust anyone in this world.

I lay in my bed. Most of my classmates are still out partying. I would have been too if I hadn't fallen on my spine. I close my eyes, desperate for sleep. Maybe this is all a nightmare; I’ll wake up the strong healthy lunatic I was before the fall. My mind flashes back to the incident. I remember letting myself go; feeling that God has had enough of my rebellion, the constant years of putting him to the test. I‘m falling again, but this time as I hit the earth I spring upward out of my body. I hover above the statue. Looking down I see myself lying on the ground of the Commons as grey as the stone I slipped off of. My friends are running over to me. I gaze out over the park; there are no stars and the sky is devoid of color. This is not how I want to die; I’m not ready. If there is a heaven I’m certainly not going, not at this point.

I open my eyes. I’m lying in my dorm room. The pain in my back begins to seep in, a slow pulsing ache transforming into a cutting sensation that rakes across my spine and my chest. Suddenly I‘m terrified, terrified at the prospect of living the rest of my life like this. I fear that I have forever altered my future. Before me stretches an existence of futility; gone are sports, health, joy. In its place, disability and regret.

Have you ever faced a moment where you felt you had wrecked your life? It is truly demonic. Proof that there is a hell. And hell is being convinced there is no hope; this time, you’re not waking up from the nightmare. Perhaps I had made a mistake, perhaps dying would have been the better choice. I look around my bed; the darkness seems to have a corporeal form. I know this sounds like some kind of B-rated fright flick but, I kid you not, the shadows were approaching me. I was a freshman in college, one week in, with a broken vertebra pressing on my spinal chord, barely able to breathe and losing my mind. I was supposed to be chasing tail and making the parents proud. But instead I was curled up in a fetal position, my back on fire, tears streaming down my cheeks. Big boys don't cry. I'd heard it all before and it had been digested. Since I was a kid I had worked hard on keeping down the tears. But inside every tough guy is a little bitch just waiting to come out. There's only so long you can avoid the tide of the past before it pulls you under. It would take bottles of Prozac before I could claw my way back up to the surface.

Chapter 6

I’ve always craved attention. As I said before, I was always all about impressing my boys, I tried my damndest to be a tough guy. At the age of fourteen I was no different. I lived on one hundred and second and Broadway above a famous pizza shop called Sal and Carmine's. Sal and Carmine were two old dudes straight off the boat from Palermo. They got here in their teens and had been slinging mozzarella ever since. They made a mean pizza, probably the best on the upper west side. I went to that pizza shop often, sat in the back beneath the whirring ceiling fans, high off my ass, munching on a delicious mushroom slice. Dang, just thinking about it is making me hungry.

Every morning I would walk past Sal and Carmines on my way to the train station at 103rd. The facade of the shop front was covered by a steel wall. It wasn't even eight o'clock yet, pizza flipping was hours away. The only people out at that hour were other school kids, their backs weighed down by book bags stuffed with the overly priced tomes their parents paid for at their overly priced private schools. This was the upper west side, home of the liberal Jew, the socially conscious New York Times reading over achieving wanker. It was also home of the bum -- vagrants who wandered down streets with blankets wrapped around their necks, their heads covered, looking like members of some lost nomadic tribe. They kept their eyes on the pavement, searching for cigarette butts, occasionally reaching out their arms to the passersby in an effort to collect change.

The kids were pouring into train stations, waiting at bus stops for yellow mammoths that would carry them across town east toward Dalton, or up on the Westside highway to Fieldston, Riverdale or Horace Mann. The kids were all ages, from wide-eyed sevens to hung over seventeens. I was somewhere in between, bounding down the steps of the 103rd street train station. Coasting through the turnstiles for the uptown side.

I went to a private school in Riverdale; I would take the local train all the way to 242nd street. This was a trek. We would entertain ourselves by scratching graffiti on the walls of the train when the cars emptied out at 168th. It was a dangerous way to get to school for a scrawny white boy, the emptier the train, the more likely a robbery, or a beat down. This was the golden age of hip hop, the early nineties before rap music was about The Black Eyed Peas. I'm talking about when rap was rugged, Black Moon, Brand Nubian and the Ghetto Boys. This was when you'd get your ass whipped in Manhattan for looking at some one too long.

The uptown platform was never very crowded. That day was no different. Most Upper West Siders went downtown for work and school. Uptown was no mans land: Harlem, Washington Heights, The Bronx. There were only two reasons why the rich would venture to these areas: one was to buy weed, and the other was to recite Shakespeare at some swanky prep school. At that point in my life I fell into the latter category….usually. An uptown one train rolled into the station and my buddy Tim stepped out. We gave each other a secret handshake as the train continued north and the exiting passengers left the platform. Tim was a young Filipino/Puerto Rican roughneck who went to my school. He carried brass knuckles in his back pocket and was nicknamed "Hagen," after the tobacco Copenhagen. We were all into dipping tobacco during eighth grade. We called it dip. We would walk around school with tobacco lodged in the pocket of our lower lip, cutting its way into our bloodstream, giving our little pre-pubescent heads a jagged rush. Tim lived on Long Island; he would commute every day to Penn Station, board the local up to 103rd, meet me, and we would take turns hanging off the back of the train. He was a very handsome kid, buzz cut, brown eyes, and a chiseled face. He took fashion seriously, always adopting the latest styles and wearing them well. Several times during high school, random women tried to recruit him for modeling. Though rough around the edges, Tim was a good student with a lot of promise. His greatest flaw was that he ran with a bad crowd. I was part of that crowd. Instead of just going to school and getting there early like a good little scholarship student, Tim spent his mornings riding to Riverdale with a crazy whiteboy who liked to begin his day by hanging off trains.

We walked to the end of the platform where the last car would stop. It was my turn to hang off the back and I was more than happy to. Tim was a cool kid, but he lacked balls; this was really my game. Tim usually just went along for the ride on things, no pun intended.

The train arrives, pulls into the station. The doors open in the last car and Tim enters. The car is empty. Perfect. I walk to the back of the train quickly, jumping onto a small ledge that juts out from the last door. I hold onto two handles on the back, standing on the little ledge, completely outside of the train, unable to enter. This last door doesn’t open, at least not without a key. I’m hanging from the back of the train, the tracks directly beneath my feet, nothing behind me but a dark tunnel. The tracks begin to recede, the train is rolling, and I’m off on the ride of my life.

My boy Tim could see me through the window of the door. If anyone walked in, what a shock they would get, looking toward the back of the train. Instead of seeing a black empty tunnel they would see a little white grinning face, yelling in glee as he risked life and limb. And for what? For a rush, for a rep? I was insane. Just as I was the night I climbed that statue.

When the train rose above ground the real fun began. You would be suspended one hundred feet in the air, the wind rushing by the sides of your face, below you the metal train rails of the suspended tracks. If you looked closely beneath your feet you could see the street below. I remember hanging off the back of a stalled above ground train somewhere between 125th and 137th. That is some scary shit. Not only do you have to hold on tight but you’ve got to duck down in case a conductor comes walking into the last car and peers out the back door window.

The train provided endless entertainment for me as a teenager. My friend Mo and I would ride the train home alone sometimes, just him and me, separate from the rest of our crew. Our crew had two names. We began with U.F.W. when we were thirteen. U.F.W. stood for United Federation of Winos. Not exactly the most diplomatic of titles. U.F.W. consisted of myself, Tim, Jun, Mo, Barry, J.R., Phil and James. We drank “forties,” forty ounces of bottled beers named after dead Indians; we smoked weed rolled in blunts and covered with roach spray, we wrote primitive graffiti, listened to rap music, fought other kids, went to house parties, lit bonfires, set off fireworks, hung off trains, stole cassette tapes and broke shit. We were model citizens. U.F.W. eventually grew into Nocturnal Artists, or N.A. The Nocturnal Artists consisted of myself, Tim, Jun, Mo, Phil and James. We had lost two Members. J.R. and Barry had been expelled from school and moved on to other hells.

The Nocturnal Artists were fifteen year olds who enjoyed a wide range of after school activities: we explored abandoned train tunnels, fought older and bigger kids for a rep, tripped on acid and mushrooms and cruised the Times Square area -- stepping into peep booths where five dollars got you a handful of ass and tits. We were now self proclaimed graffiti artists with tags like 'Hagen' and 'Tense.' We smoked weed without roach spray and stayed out all night. We slept on rocks or park benches and attended double features for two dollars, stabbing the screens if the movies were bad. We were out of our minds.

I remember one of those days when Mo and I were separated from the rest of our crew. School had let out and we were walking down the hill on 242nd Street toward the local train. Our pockets were stuffed with treats, the explosive kind. That weekend we had taken a trip to Chinatown, maybe the most filthy part of Manhattan. Chinatown is an old section of downtown New York with crooked streets and crooked vendors who pose as trinket salesman, but take a closer look and you'll find back rooms filled with

whores, weapons, and fireworks. Mo and I had purchased several pineapples and a knife. Pineapples are mini sticks of dynamite. When they explode they make a huge boom and can blow a man’s arm off. We used to light them inside a slit tennis ball and throw the ball at people. We were the kind of boys that you warn your daughter about or you recommend speak with the school psychologist.

We boarded the local train at 242nd Street, hanging out in the last car. As the train rolled toward Manhattan, Mo and I stood between cars. We wobbled back and forth on an unsturdy metal bridge. The bridge wasn't made for standing. It groaned beneath our weight as we reached into our jackets and prepared our explosives. We were still above ground at that point, almost at Dykeman Street where Jim Carroll grew up. Beneath us, Washington Heights bustled in its afternoon business -- Dominicans selling weed, white boys getting set up, angry cabbies pounding their horns and swearing in Swahili. Mo and I each lit a pineapple. We held them momentarily while the wicks burnt; we laughed and tossed them over the sides of the tracks. With the speed of the train it was about another twenty-five feet before we heard them explode below. I wonder whether or not we maimed some one. Guess I'll find out at closing time when I knock on those Pearlies and ask Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed to let me in. I wonder which one it will be? Just my luck, probably Mohammed. Or maybe the chosen people could actually turn out to be Mexicans. Shit, the bible says the meek will inherit the earth, can't get much meeker than a small Mexican guy washing dishes in some storefront restaurant in Astoria. Those people deserve a break. They deserve to be the chosen. Maybe Jesus will return as a Latino busboy working in some grimy pizza joint in Little Italy.

After we dropped the fireworks, Mo and I stayed between cars as the train was swallowed by a tunnel at 181st Street. We kept lighting more pineapples as the train filled up. We would toss them into the dark of the tunnel and watch the reactions from commuters as the dynamite sticks exploded. When the fireworks went off we would see people through the glass windows that separated the train cars, jumping from their seats. Some of them hit the deck like they were dodging gunshots. This was pre 9/11 and back then, we found this to be fuckin’ hilarious.

Together Mo and I formed one heck of a dysfunctional duo. He's a Japanese Jew and I'm half-gentile. That's Manhattan for you, a big apple rotting with the products of mixed marriages, a bunch of ethnically confused worms looking for a way out. Mo is a tough looking guy, with angry black eyes and broad shoulders. He loves horror movies, weed and rap, and is particularly proud of his Jewish heritage. Most people are confounded by us New Yorkers, why we are the way we are, such a fucked up smorgasbord of odd ethnic combinations. We're simply the grand kids of immigrants who had the weight of the world on their shoulders, who came to this forbidding city, looking to carve a out a sizeable niche for their family name and raised a generation of children who were overachievers. Mo and I are the kids of these polyglot pioneers, over privileged mutts who never really had to work that hard -- stuck inside the Apple, trying to figure out if we should stay or get the hell out while there's still time.

Mo had some disturbing experiences during those train rides home from high school. We were all really into fashion back then, hood fashion. We each wore Columbia rain suits. I had the green one, Tim had the black one, J.R. had the yellow etc. Why were rain suits in? Don't ask me. Dudes wear weird shit when it comes to fashion. In the sixties, Alex and his Clockwork Orange droogs wore flashy jock straps, Downey Junior wore multi colored ties in the eighties and guys in the seventies wore jeans so tight that they galvanized a group of testicles to form a union.

When we weren't wearing rain suits we were decked out in Carhart workman's clothes, the other hot fashion item of the early nineties. I remember the day Mo brought a brand new Carhart jacket and wore it to school. It was tan, a construction worker styled thing of beauty. We were fourteen years old and on our way home. There was Mo, Barry, J.R., Tim and myself boarding a local train at 242nd Street. We had the last car all to ourselves. One stop later a group of Dominican kids entered. When I say a group I mean there was about fifteen of them. They were older and bigger than us, at least seventeen years old. They spotted Mo and his new Carhart right away. I was scared shitless; we were in for trouble. In those days, the David Dinkins days, when a group of Dominican kids from the Heights came across you in an empty train car wearing some brand new Carhart’s, you were getting robbed.

Four of them approached Mo. "Nice jacket," one of the boys said. Mo knew he was fucked, but Mo was tough. He stood up and got in their faces. One of the kids punched him in the cheek, knocking him right back down in his seat. Tim and I defiantly stood up. We were immediately slapped hard and knocked down as well. Then one of them grabbed Mo's coat. Again, Mo resisted. There are few people with this kind of heart and one thing Mo wasn't afraid of was physical pain. The train stopped again at the next stop. All of us were screaming at the Dominicans to get off Mo but instead they picked us up and literally threw us off the train. That’s how much bigger than us they were. We fell in a heap on the platform of 225th, all of us except for Mo. The car doors closed and as the train rolled away all I could see was a group of guys stomping. Mo was nowhere to be seen. Long story short, they took his brand new jacket and fucked him up bad, kicking him repeatedly in the face. After enduring all of that Mo still hung out with us that night. It's amazing how a kid can get severely beaten and bounce right back. There he was in the dead of winter without a jacket, cuts and bruises all over his face, silently drinking forty ounces of liquor named after some crazy dead Indian.

Mo really did take his fair share of ass whippings. When we were sixteen we used to hang out at this NYU bar called Poppa's. The place was filled with college frat boys, nineteen year old thug wannabes wearing North Face jackets and forcing beer on freshman girls. These were the kind of guys who got a lot of drunk sex. Drunken sex can be great as long as you remember it; the girl has no inhibitions and you can usually last for a pretty long time. My father says that sex without love is merely masturbation. This may be true, but some of these drunken encounters make for magnificent quasi

jerk-off sessions.

It was precisely those drunken college girls that drew Tim, myself, Phil, Jun and Mo to that NYU bar one night. We were way too young to be there, but these were the days when ten dollars could buy you a fake ID and bouncers really didn't give a fuck. Somehow or other we managed to get served drinks and proceeded to hit on girls way too old for us. Having had one too many I made the mistake of coming on to a college chick in front of her boyfriend. He and his fraternity brothers witnessed the whole thing and got massively pissed. They circled around us in that dingy little bar threatening that if we were to ever return they would beat our little scummy asses into the gravel. We were way outnumbered and our survival instinct kicked in. We left Poppa's, muttering curses and giving hard stares.

Did we return? Of course. The next night. All of the Nocturnal Artists crew came back including James and two of his friends from The Grand Concourse. Now there were about twelve of those college kids at the NYU bar. Some of them had been there the night before and they knew about the beef; they knew who we were. My buddy Phil, a crazy dreadlocked Bajan went into the bar to bring them outside. Phil was a brawler, tall with slanty eyes and a dark pretty boy face. He was very brainy, but the type of kid who followed his dick around like a compass; wherever it took him, pussy, violence, he followed. Phil brought the older kids out onto the street and into some back alley behind the bar. We followed and stood our ground, listening as Phil spoke loudly with the leader of the college pricksters. Phil was up in the guy's face. He was a white dude, and although he was trying to act tough, I could tell he was intimidated by the wildly gesticulating young black man standing in front of him. We were still outnumbered, but it was eight to twelve as opposed to having only five guys like we did the night before. The frat boy was telling Phil that the beef was my fault, that I had acted like a jerk the night before and hit on some chick who had a man. Phil didn't care that the fault was mine. Phil was a Nocturnal Artist; Phil was family, and Phil smelled blood. We stood there, the eight of us, listening to the two of them argue. The alley was wet, it had been raining. A yellow streetlamp from the avenue beyond illuminated the faces of the opposition. They were pissed, annoyed that they hadn't just set on us, that their leader was deigning to speak to some sixteen year old dreadlocked punk from uptown. They peered at us with disgust from beneath their baseball cap brims. Mo was standing very close to one of them as Phil and the frat boy leader bantered back and forth. Suddenly the guy standing next to Mo interrupts Phil by yelling, "We should just fuck these punks up!" Mo doesn't hesitate; he punches the kid right in the face. It was hard, we all heard it. There was a moment of silence, shock. We were outnumbered by at least four caps, we were smaller than these guys and Mo had just set the fight off. What a warrior this kid was.

The wild ruckus began. Fists were flying. Chased by three goons, in the melee, Mo tripped over the sidewalk. He slammed his head on the side of the curb and was knocked out -- so much for his moment of courage (he's still the man though). We fought like animals, working together, moving in a pack, our backs to each other as we fended off those NYU bitch asses. One kid ran toward Jun and swung too early. The inertia screwed him and he stumbled forward right into Jun's kill zone. Jun was Japanese, small, compact and broad shouldered. He had the looks of a gangster. He dated the hottest Puerto Rican chick in school and was fucking her. Jun was always one smooth character, very polished. Jun laid the kid out.

A little ways up the street Tim and Phil are moving towards this big tall linebacker looking guy who keeps backing up. Why he would back up I don't know. These college fucks were older and bigger, but yet during the fight it was like they were constantly retreating. Just goes to show you how far heart will carry you. The Nocturnal Artists were brave motherfuckers, Spartans. I guess it runs in the blood. My father is also the type who won't back down from anything, even when it's the prudent thing to do. The linebacker guy backs up right into my skinny arms. I grab him from beneath the shoulders, wrap my limbs around him and bring him down hard on his back. He slams into the pavement and we set on him with kicks to the face and gut.

We did well for an outnumbered gang of sixteen year olds. Eventually the NYU crew scattered, acting as if the police were coming. Pussies, I wish I could have been at their next frat party when they explained to the rest of their brothers why they ran away from a couple of pubescent sixteen year olds. I bet someone got an ass paddling. The only one among of us who was hurt that night was Mo. He had a bad concussion. The poor guy was stumbling around, muttering about street, head, home, train, rain, trying to string together words that didn’t match. We were worried. But at sixteen you spend most of your time finding shit amusing so we just laughed at him and watched as he staggered alone toward the east side trains. A mixed race anomaly with a concussion trying to make his way back to Yorkville, the stuffy Upper East Side Wasp haven that he called home.