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## **BLOWING IT**

By William Harcourt

This article is a re-print from the October 1989 issue of Philadelphia Magazine.

### **Introduction - 2018**

In September of 1978, at twenty-three years-old, I decided to ride a motorcycle across the county to live in a large, 1700's stone farmhouse with 300 acres of wild land in Bucks County, PA. It was owned by a friend I had met while living in Pasadena, CA. Her name was Maxine and we loved each other. My intention was to work as a bartender and write a novel, but after three months on the farm Max declared that she was moving to Paris and that I should accompany her. She was the eccentric step daughter of a billionaire. I was broke. And while Max offered to support me, I could not accept, so, she left and I directed my motorcycle to Philadelphia. A friend of Maxine's was a waitress at a nightclub on South Street: Philadelphia's version of Greenwich Village. I found her at work and met with the owners. They hired me that day to replace a bartender who had broken his arm. Bad luck for him and good fortune for me, I thought. Philadelphia couldn't have been more different from LA. I was enthralled with its history and architecture and excited by the art/hedonist environment on South Street. I easily envisioned writing my manuscript, perhaps in a small loft over a Peking Duck restaurant in Chinatown.

It didn't turn-out quite that way.

In October of 1989, even years later, Philadelphia Magazine published an article that I wrote called, "Blowing It". The article chronicled some of my experiences smuggling cocaine and my time in prison as a result. "Blowing It" won the Best Creative Writing piece for 1989; awarded each year since 1909 by the Society of Professional Journalists.

## **Blowing It**

### **North Philadelphia Halfway House - 1989**

It's 3:00am. Somewhere outside a dog is barking. So once again I'm staring at the ceiling. This one seems to be miles away, and the bare light bulb is slightly cocked. It'll blow out a few hours from now when Jack, one of my new roommates, flips on the switch. Funny thing: In three years I never saw a light blow out in prison.

Now it's 4:00am.

Standing at the tall window and peeling back the shade, I can't see the offending mutt, but he's close – chained unhappily in one of the back yards, surrounded by high piles of trash. I thought that once I made it to the halfway house I'd finally be free to sleep. For a moment I consider dogicide, but as I look across the alley at the rotted wood and wire fences it occurs to me that we're comrades. Chained by night and loose by day, this howling dog and I are in it together. I return to bed and continue staring at the ceiling.

Ten years ago, I spent lots of time wondering what the future would bring. Back then I burned with desire. I wanted to extend myself and discover the answers to life's meaning. I had such ambition, such high hopes, but no direction, just a tremendous sense of adventure. It led me to places, experiences and people that I will never forget. I arrived at the edge of reality and looked it over...then stepped beyond.

### **Pennsylvania - 1978**

I was leaning over the handlebars of my motorcycle at 100 miles an hour as I rode past Loretto, Pennsylvania on my way to Philadelphia. Loretto meant nothing to me then, just another sleepy farm town. Eight days earlier I left everything and everyone in LA to seek my fortune. All across the Midwest I had marveled at the picturesque rural settings, but I couldn't believe that people actually spent their lives in such simplicity without the life-blood of nightclubs, beautiful girls and action. My sojourn began with a dream of personal freedom and adventure and my destination was sealed when I met a Philadelphia girl in Pasadena. When she decided to leave LA and return home, I followed soon after. Riding a motorcycle across the country was a dream I held close after seeing the movie, "Easy Rider" during the eighth grade of elementary school. That's where the mental chemistry began for me.

After my arrival I landed a job bartending at a restaurant/nightclub called, The Latest Dish just off South Street in Queens Village by the river. I met Allen, who was working as a waiter/manager while attending Rutgers University across the river in Camden, NJ. He lived in a closet off South 5<sup>th</sup>. Street. I got a little one-bedroom on Monroe Street, worked 60+ hour weeks, hung-out late and had more women than I ever thought possible. Disco ruled the day and our club jumped every night. Of course, one's courage and imagination increased significantly with alcohol, and drugs were extremely popular. Everyone was constantly searching for drugs. No one had good-quality cocaine, but still coke was the drug of choice. People always approached the bartender as a reliable source and at that time a friend named Jerry was selling what was considered the best grams available, so I directed people to him.

After about a year, in 1979, a very well-dressed dental student from the University of Pennsylvania approached me one night while I was behind the bar at the Dish. Jerry had told me about his sensational

cocaine connection, a brilliant student from Manhattan named David. I didn't know that Jerry had run-up a \$10,000 debt; nor did I know that Jerry had told David that I was in on things too. I greeted the unfamiliar face.

"What can I get you?"

"How about a shot of vodka and \$10,000 in cash, Willy."

"Sorry, I only stock the vodka. Have we met?"

He grinned and leaned over the bar.

"I think you've heard of me. I'm a friend of Jerry's. My name is, David."

I poured us both a shot and said, "I've heard of you, David, and I'm not surprised at Jerry's problem. He's out of control."

David leaned back on his bar stool, "It's your problem too, isn't it? Jerry told me that you're his partner and doing things in California. Isn't that where my money is?"

"Jerry has a creative imagination. I'm not his partner and I'm not shipping cocaine to California, but I am impressed with your quality and under certain conditions I might be willing to assume Jerry's debt."

He laughed.

"Really, what sort of conditions?"

"First, I need to know a lot more about what's happening."

David had an eager twinkle in his eye. He raised his glass for more drinks.

"Willy, I've been looking for someone like you."

A few weeks later David introduced me to a friendly, unassuming, sloppy-haired wizard named, Larry Lavin. My adventure and my eventual downfall had begun.

## **FCI Loretto - 1986**

Allen is my best friend in the world though I'd only told him once, I think. Neither of us said much as we drove west through Pennsylvania. Our destination was Loretto, specifically, the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) where I had been ordered to surrender myself on the 26<sup>th</sup>. My sentence was eight years.

We took a winding driveway up a hill to a large parking lot. Allen wasn't sure where to pull over. He stopped near the front door of the red brick building and, both smiling, we shook hands and I said, "Piece of cake." Walking toward the entrance I noticed a 1967 Mustang fastback parked in the slot named, "Warden." I turned, ran back to Allen and flung open his car door.

“See! The Warden drives a Mustang. How bad could it be?”

Tears were rolling down Allen’s cheeks. He looked away and, embarrassed, I closed the door and walked toward the entrance of the prison. A few minutes later I was up against a wall being frisked...and then I was escorted down a long linoleum and cement corridor, down two flights of metal stairs and down another cement hallway to a small room with a fluorescent light, a toilet, a barred window and a metal mesh bench.

“Strip!”

I had to open my mouth and show under my tongue, pull my ears forward, rustle my hair, raise my arms and legs, display the bottoms of my feet and between my toes, raise my penis and testicles then bend over and spread. For this the guard crouched and took a very long look. What was he searching for? Guns? A joint? Cocaine? Was I particularly memorable or grotesque?

I was issued ill-fitting clothes and escorted to a desk in another room where the hours of initial paperwork began. Before I could complete the forms, a phone call came for the guard at the desk.

“Relax,” he said after hanging-up the receiver. “You’re taking a trip.”

“What? I just got here.”

“Sit tight.”

Two more guards entered the room. They shackled my legs and cuffed my wrists.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re taking you to the county hole.”

“What for?”

No response.

“I want to see somebody in authority! I want to see the Warden!”

The guards burst into laughter as they yanked me on my feet.

## **Miami - 1980**

Shirtless and peeling, wearing corduroy shorts and no shoes, Ronald ambled in the den from his lounge by the pool where two parrots and a macaw were screeching at each other. “Ronald,” I said. “I’ve been waiting here for three hours. How much longer is your man going to take?”

“I told you, Willy, sometimes Hector runs a little late, but believe me, you’re going to be glad you waited. He’s got the best coke in Miami. So why don’t you relax?” Ronald walked behind the bar,

reached into a large, plastic trash bag and produced a long, full stalk of marijuana buds. "This just arrived from Jamaica." I declined. Ronald shook his head, "Man, you're always so pressed for time."

Thought I'd been coming to Florida for many months now, I didn't enjoy waiting around with \$336,000 in a sports bag. But it was usually like this. I still didn't have a steady source of uncut cocaine. This trip I was looking for six kilos, about 13 pounds; a lot at that time. Ronald was just one of several people I dealt with. Sometimes the run went smoothly. The week before I'd found four good kilos on the first try, but now I'd been in town 18 hours without sleep and had seen nearly 20 kilos from a variety of suppliers. None of them possessed the quality I required. Usually I'd find a good kilo here and grab another one there. Already I had learned one thing: The longer it took the crazier it got. On the street your luck was limited. The local news reported deaths in drug deals gone wrong or by cartel execution every day. I felt that I had a certain amount of time before things would go bad, but I never knew how much time, so I was constantly evaluating, looking and listening for the warning signs. I didn't know Ronald. I didn't know any of the people that I bought from. Sometimes they were nice with their children sleeping in the next room. Most of the time they were armed and dangerous. I was neither. They were drugged and hyperactive and appeared from the shadows with lies and cocaine. One thing was common to all: They were middlemen scrambling to keep their place in the chain, to collect their cut of the money in my bag. Their lives, however sane or sordid, depended on it. I was a big buyer. People were fighting for my business. I had that going for me, but I knew that I had to find a large, steady source soon. My luck couldn't last forever. I stepped behind the bar, poured myself an expensive scotch and returned to the couch.

"Ronald," I finally said, "If Hector's not here in another half-hour, I'm leaving."

## **FCI Loretto – 1986**

An hour after I entered Loretto I was transported to the Cambria County jail which was a miserable stone box built in 1897. I experienced the classic prison movie moment of walking a corridor of cells with the inmates screaming things like, "Fresh meat!" on the way to the bottom floor where they dropped me in the hole. Apparently too many of my co-defendants were present in Loretto, so we had to be sorted and shipped according to who had cooperated against whom. My prison bit had begun and though I didn't know who was in Loretto or what parts they played in my fate, I was branded a "rat" upon my return from five days in the hole. I held my ground and did not plead my case with anyone; official or inmate. In prison your principles are your only possessions. If you abandon them you have nothing. You are nothing.

## **Miami – 1980**

Hector, a jittery Cuban dressed in Jordache jeans, a green Lacoste polo and iguana cowboy boots arrived at Ronald's house 20 minutes later. He was empty-handed and I was furious.

"Ronald, this is ridiculous!"

"Hey," Hector explained, "I thought you knew that I didn't have the stuff with me, but I can get it. Here, here's a sample." He placed a large vile containing about seven grams of rock on the coffee table. Ronald swooped-down with a mirror and razor blade and began chopping. "You can do six kilos of these?" Ronald asked.

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Hector poured himself a drink and leaned against the bar, displaying his large rings. "Yes, I can! But Willy, I got to see your money first."

Everybody always wanted to see the money. It was under the table; never out of my sight. I picked up a rock. It was very nice: white and shiny. I snapped it in half. It was layered inside like mica. There were hard to find.

"How much a key?"

Ronald and Hector looked quickly at each other. Hector said, "\$60,000." I frowned and Ronald said, "Uh, no, Hector, I told you, Willy's a preferred customer. He pays \$56,000." By now I was well past impatient. "Hector," I said, "How long for you to deliver six of these?" He moved closer. "You got the money here?"

I stood and took a deep breath. Ronald's four-bedroom Coconut Grove house was beautiful and filled with the latest in electronics and automatic weapons all mounted on the walls. Hector stepped back as I moved to the bar. I was much taller and heavier than he. I refilled my glass with the scotch we were both drinking and, smiling, I said, "I have the money. Ronald's seen it and he knows where it is. So, how long?" Ronald nodded in agreement, then Hector picked-up the phone on the bar and started dialing. He addressed a man I'll call Jorge in a respectful tone. From what I understood of the conversation, I believed that Jorge could produce six good keys. (I spoke some Spanish, having remembered a lot from high school and having a knack for it; though I never revealed this to anyone in Miami. I thought that it might save my life one day.) The conversation concluded with instructions for Hector and me to go with the money to a motel in Miami Beach later that evening. I called Larry in Philadelphia.

"The weather has been lousy so far, but I saw a small sample of what it should be like. Heavy sunglasses. Hopefully I'll be outta here tomorrow morning."

"Who are you with?"

"Ronald right now, but I'm meeting new people."

"OK, call me tonight after you've made your plane reservation and I'll pick you up."

"Yeah, well, I hope it happens tonight."

Four hours later I was riding with Hector in his Monte Carlo to Miami Beach. It was a beautiful night with a full moon. I waited for my first glimpse of the legendary strip of hotels: home to the June Taylor dancers and my personal hero, Jackie Gleason.

We arrived at a less than glamorous motel off the strip. Hector called from the lobby phone and when we reached the room, it was unlocked. I entered and saw purple curtains, a bathroom door slightly open, an unplugged phone, a burning cigarette in a cheap plastic ashtray on a table at the end of the room with a suitcase on it and a small, Latin man with a neatly trimmed mustache, pointed shoes, an open disco shirt and gold Porsche sunglasses. He was chewing gum and fingering the many gold chains around his neck. I placed my bag on the bed and Hector introduced us.

"Willy, this is Jorge. Jorge, this is Willy."

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Jorge nodded.

The bathroom door opened and two men holding Uzis stepped out. Hector edged against the wall. I stared at the guns and the men holding them, then smiled at Jorge and raised my hands.

"I'm not here to rip you off."

Jorge laughed. "You not here to rip me off? That's good to know. What's in the bag?"

"Money. What's in your suitcase?"

"You show me first!"

I unzipped my bag and held it open.

"Let's see the keys."

Jorge opened the suitcase and pulled out six large Ziploc bags of mixed rocks and powder. He stepped behind the men with the guns. I carefully examined the cocaine, first by snapping a few rocks in half to examine their centers. Some were blank; like chalk. I knew that they had been "cut" and reformed into rocks in Miami. We called them "re-rocks." Others were large and sticky and shaped like chewed bubble gum. Still others were hard and yellow. These I called rocket fuel; they were potent, but speedy and they burned your nose. I closed each bag and gently shook them to quickly determine the percentage of rock and to see how much cut had been added to the shake, or powder (the additives would cling to the plastic). There wasn't any need to test them further. Five were badly cut. Only one kilo resembled the sample I'd seen that afternoon. I called Hector over.

"I can't use these five, but I'll take this one."

Hector looked scared. In a low voice he said, "Man, you better take them all. These guys are not fucking around."

Now Jorge moved beside me. He lowered his sunglasses.

"Nice stuff, huh? Let's count the money."

I looked Jorge in the eyes. "You know, you went to a lot of trouble to arrange this and I appreciate your efforts, but I can't use these five. I will take this one though."

He threw his glasses against the wall.

"What!?"

I kept my position close to him.

"My customers are very particular. They demand top quality," I tapped the good kilo, "Keys like this one. I'm down here every week and I need a man who can keep his word and provide them."



Silence in the room. The gunmen were staring at me, Jorge and each other. I was sweating. Then Jorge tore into Hector in heated Spanish. As he was screaming I went to my bag, counted-out \$56,000 and placed it on the table beside the kilos and said, "Jorge, we both know the problems of working with too many people. Ronald probably gave Hector the wrong information. So that *you* know, I need uncut white, pink or off-white keys; no re-rock and no yellow rocks. Now, I'm seeing other people tomorrow, but if you can help me, call the Airport Marriott and ask for Mr. Richards."

Still glaring, Jorge thought for a minute and then said, "Willy, under the bed there is another suitcase. Take a look."

I reached under the bed and pulled out the suitcase. Inside it was five more kilos like the one I'd agreed to buy.

"Ok," I said after a quick glance at each one. I'll take these five too."

Everybody relaxed.

The next morning it was nervous time again. I only had 30 minutes to make my flight and six kilos barely fit in my carry-on. There wasn't much room to disguise them. When I finished packing, the bag bulged from every side, but I had to go. It was Allen's birthday, so I called him from the airport before stepping in line to pass the security checkpoint.

When my bag appeared on the X-ray screen a complete corner of one of the keys was exposed. There, for all to see, was the clear outline of rocks inside a plastic bag. The female security officer looked at me as the bag passed, then told the Florida State Trooper to send it through again. I was trying to find the appropriate facial expression – something strong, cute, sincere and innocent. She studied me for what seemed to be an eternity. The Trooper removed my bag from the conveyor and said, "Well?"

"It's okay. He can go."

Silently, I thanked her, grabbed my bag, boarded the plane, found my seat, placed my bag under the seat in front of me and drank all of the vodka they had. Another successful run.

## **FCI Loretto – 1986**

"You're going to be here a long time, Harcourt, so just relax."

These were the words that my prison counselor used as he assigned me to live in an eight-man room and duty in the electric shop. Loretto was originally a Catholic seminary. It was built in the 1960's and was still being converted to a guarded concrete box. Though I had no electrical training or experience, I found the work interesting. My days of pulling wire through walls passed with thoughts of a little truck with "Willy's Electrical Service" painted on the side. I would emerge from prison as an electrician, but I found myself feeling the same dilemmas and uncertainties I'd experienced all my life. Lying on my top bunk at night with the sounds of men coughing, clearing sinuses and farting all around me, I searched the acoustic ceiling three feet above for hidden patterns. As the hours passed images would come to me, scenes so clear and real it was as if my eyes had turned inward. I wandered over my childhood and

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through the academic and athletic glories of my youth, then leaving home and struggling. Moving from a banking career and college into different dumps and the long hours of listening to music and writing, climbing the peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains and swimming in the Pacific Ocean. Then, in my mind, I ventured east and witnessed my demise, slow at first, then unrestrained. I am not suggesting that it was the East Coast. No, it was danger, booze and cash that did me in.

Prison was painful in the beginning, but I got used to it. There were men from all levels and professions in society, all races and religions, heterosexual and homosexual. Aside from refereeing basketball games and striking-up a friendship with a writer from Manhattan, I kept to myself. After a while I began to imagine what freedom and the future might look like. I wrote short stories in my spare time and rehearsed presenting my work to publishers and producers. I thought of new approaches to television and advertising. I designed the perfect nightclub. My mind was flooded with ideas. I thought of being with friends at sporting events, at parties dancing and singing, walking with my girlfriend through a meadow and telling her all of the things I refused to share before. Making love. But soon the blaring loud speaker or an invading hack (guard) would break the trance and bring me back to reality. I would turn and bury my face in the shallow pillow. Dawn was near. I'd try to sleep.

After 12 weeks in the eight-man room I was assigned to an 8X12 foot two-man room with a guy from Pittsburgh. I was dying for the semi-privacy of sharing a sink with only one other stranger. (Toilets and showers were communal.)

Joey was in his 40's. He was a big, muscular, pot-bellied black man about my size with missing front teeth and deep scars on his face and arms. He called me, "Hardcore." Joey was in on a weapons charge. He was a collector for a mafia type who loan-sharked and owned a small string of massage parlors. Joey had very little education and terrible personal habits. He bathed once every three or four weeks and would wear his clothes in the shower to wash them. As tough as he was, he was afraid to be nude in the presence of other men. His nails were long and curled under his fingers and his gas was not to be believed. The room smelled so bad that my few inmate friends would not enter it. They communicated with me by slipping notes under the door. My small, prefab desk where I sat reading and writing was jammed between the sink and the window which I kept open day and night. It got to where I wouldn't notice the smell unless I had just entered the room or was interrupted by Joey. He interrupted me constantly, asking for quarters or expressing his fear of black magic and the control of the world by Masons.

Weeks passed and we became friendly. I helped him write letters to his former wives and the grown daughters he had never known. He was curious about my case and nearly bursting with stories about himself; amusing anecdotes from the world of prostitution and extortion. Just before dawn one morning Joey got out of bed (I had the top bunk) and, standing before the sink he looked back over his shoulder at me. Thinking I was asleep he urinated into the sink. It took me a month to get another room.

### **Miami – 1981**

"I'm telling you Chorty, he makes me sick! If a man is not a man, then he is nothing!"

Because of my size, Jorge had nick-named me Shorty, or, "Chorty" as he pronounced it. He had picked me up at the Miami airport. I tossed my bag containing \$672,000 in the back bed of his truck and jumped in the raised four-wheel drive. The truck had an elaborate electronics system with a walkie-

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talkie. Jorge exited the airport and pulled a vial from his shirt pocket. Steering with his knees he snorted some cocaine off his hand.

“Does this mean that I won’t be seeing Hector anymore?”

“Chorty, we’ve been doing good business and I like you. I respect you. Today we are going to my partner’s house. He wants to meet you. There’s no place for Hector there.”

Coming to a yield sign, Jorge should have slowed, but he wasn’t watching and an approaching Greyhound bus blew its horn. Jorge sped ahead, then cut-off the bus and slammed on his brakes. The bus barely stopped behind us. Screaming, Jorge removed a Beretta 9-mm pistol from the back of his pants. I caught his arm as he opened his door.

“Jorge, what are you doing?”

“That driver’s fucking with me, man! I kill him!”

“Jorge, are you fucking crazy?!” I yanked his arm to restrain him. “Get in the truck and get going!”

Soon we rolled into the circular driveway of a fenced stucco house where a Mercedes and a customized Volvo were parked under the protection of palm trees. I could see a motor yacht moored out back. Jorge’s partner, a man I’ll call Mano, was just over 6’, around 30 years-old, tan, clean-shaven and good looking. As I entered the house he introduced me to his wife; a beautiful, charming and well-educated Cuban woman. Mano had met her in Texas, his first American home after he escaped from Cuba on a homemade raft. He told me all of this as we toasted our business relationship with champagne in his office across from the game room.

From that day forward, I hand picked my kilos from an abundant inventory in Mano’s office. With a steady source finally established our business venture exploded, so flying the kilos as I had been for the past 18 months was no longer possible. Mano gave me a Buick Cutlass to drive back to Philadelphia that first day we met, but the trip alone was grueling. I purchased a large, comfortable Park Avenue and began recruiting drivers from trusted friends.

As my first year of business with Mano passed; Jorge, Mano and me became close friends. We bought birthday and Christmas presents for each other. We dined in expensive restaurants and partied in nightclubs. Having similar, calm temperaments, Mano and I got along particularly well. He owned several boats and took me racing to Bimini. He taught me sailing off the peninsula on an 18 ft. Hobie catamaran. Once, when I was staying at the Sonesta Beach Hotel in Key Biscayne, I sailed the Hobie well off shore to Jorge’s cigarette boat to receive two large suitcases filled with fresh kilos. Then I just sailed back to the beach and walked through the crowd to my waterfront suite. No problem. Later that summer Mano made the Hobie a present.

Another afternoon we were casually motoring in the boat from his house. It was another beautiful sunset in Biscayne Bay. Mano said, “Chorty, you never talk about your wife. Why not?”

“I’m not married.”

“What? How old are you?”

“Twenty-five. Why?”

“Chorty, it’s time you married. A man cannot be a man without a wife.”

That was the same winter I met Karen when she stopped unexpectedly at a friend’s apartment in Center City, Philadelphia. I had just returned from Miami and had a small amount of rock with me. I also had brought some champagne and a bottle of Grand Marnier. By the end of the night we were all fairly drunk, I in particular. Walking Karen back to her apartment I was overcome with emotions and insisted on carrying her into her apartment just to make sure it was safe, though I don’t know what I would have done to an intruder with her in my arms. Once we were settled inside I never wanted to leave. A voice inside me said, “You’ve come home.” Graciously, Karen allowed me to sleep on her couch.

### **FCI Loretto – 1987**

As the seasons of my first year passed and the story of the yuppie cocaine king, Larry Lavin, was published in two books (I was included in these), unfamiliar men approached me and identified themselves as fellow members of the organization. I remember one younger fellow who sought me out. When I told him that I had never heard of him he said, “Oh, well, I was buying from a guy in State College, PA who was buying from a guy in Philadelphia who was buying from one of your customers, Willy. You were the one buying the kilos in Miami, right?”

“That depends. When were you arrested?”

“February 1987.”

“How much time did you get?”

He looked at the floor.

“Five years,” he stamped his foot, “I can’t believe that my friend turned me in!”

Here was the domino effect: With drugs, everyone who is involved is connected, no matter how far down the chain. The image of the tough guy telling the coppers to shove off is usually just that, an image. I only know a few people like that. Most people tend to break down when facing a prison sentence. They incriminate those above and below them. When I was indicted in June of 1985 the FBI had 11 witnesses prepared to testify against me.

“Forget it,” I told my unlucky visitor, “That’s over. Besides, you were guilty. You’ve got to look to the future.”

### **Miami – 1981**

After business was conducted, I often spent long hours reclining on Mano’s office couch discussing life and the future. Mano and I agreed that drugs were temporary; just a vehicle. For him, they were the means to secure the future for his two children. “I don’t want my kids to be poor and starve like I did

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when I first came here. My son will be a doctor...a brain surgeon! And I want to free my father from jail in Cuba." Mano's father was a naval officer who opposed Castro.

For me, drugs presented the opportunity to make enough money to support my creative ambitions. I wanted to write and produce films and I thought that I need the cash to back my ideas. While Mano and I talked Jorge sat by a table with a mirror full of cocaine, shaking his head. At some point during these conversations he would suddenly jump to his feet, yank up his designer jeans and strut around the office waving his hands or a gun in the air. "Hey man," he'd say, "What's all this make-believe crap? We're drug dealers. That's what we do. I'm not a movie star. We're not brain surgeons. What you gonna do, Chorty, work at McDonalds? We're drug kings! That's what we do!"

Karen knew my dreams and I didn't lie to her about the reality. She was college educated and had a great job at a large advertising firm in Philadelphia. She didn't reject me, but she never stopped telling me to quit and pursue something real. Like everyone I have ever known who was involved in selling drugs, I set a monetary goal and assured everyone that once I reached it, I would quit. Secretly, I wondered if I could.

We decided to live together and found an upscale apartment. We traveled on vacations and holidays, but I was so busy in Miami and elsewhere that I was never around for more than a week at a time. I tried to involve Karen in the benefits of my South Florida adventure. We flew to Miami and stayed at the Fontainebleau Hotel. We visited the Bahamas. We drove to Key West and sunbathed, fished and wore funny hats. Everywhere we kept our arms tightly wrapped around each other and took rolls of pictures that I still cherish. We were always in love, but I was committed to the business and the future as I saw it. Nothing could shake me from that.

We fought. We'd break-up, miss each other terribly and make-up, then fight again. With all that was churning inside of me, I couldn't maintain a civil life. Everything had to be much bigger, including my struggle to comprehend it. Finally, she'd had enough and moved out. I told myself it was the best thing possible. After all, wasn't total freedom what my life was all about? But I knew that I had failed, that things were out of control. I was a very heavy drinker, so when I was in town I spent all of my time at bars, trying to compensate for her loss with binges of sex, drugs and alcohol. When that left me wanting, I'd go to Atlantic City, Manhattan or LA and spend ridiculous amounts of money on hotels, restaurants and clothes. This all just guaranteed my further involvement with cocaine. Nothing worked. I missed Karen, but I couldn't quit...not yet. So, I moved out of the apartment into a new, five story townhouse on the Delaware River which became my headquarters and personal nightclub.

"Chorty, did you get a room?"

Jorge was speaking to me over the mobile communications equipment that Mano had installed in the Park Avenue. Supposedly we talked on a private frequency. It was another beautiful Florida night. I had decided to drive this trip, the fifth run that month, our biggest month to date: 50 kilos bought and distributed to customers in 11 different states. (We didn't sell the kilos whole. We had devised a perfect system for packaging and distributing ounces, quarter, half and full pounds according to our various customer's specifications. We determined the quality and the price for each product and managed the downline with runners when necessary. At that time, we had over \$1 million in fronted product on the books while we rolled-over about \$2 million in cash each month.) On that particular drive I had \$1.25 million in the trunk. Another car with two drivers was trailing me in case something mechanically happened to the Park Avenue or, if I got pulled-over by the state police, that car would quickly

## STUBBORN ROAD

accelerate to a high speed then recklessly swerve, barely missing the state police vehicle. This, I hoped, would work to draw law enforcement away from my car in favor of chasing the other. Fortunately, we never had to test the theory.

“Yeah, Jorge, my usual suite at the Sonesta Beach Hotel.”

“Is Karen flying down for the weekend? We can take a speed boat to Bimini.”

“No, she left me.”

“Oh, man, I sorry to hear that. Listen, we’re gonna work tomorrow so I come to your hotel and tonight with somesing to cheer you up.”

“OK, I’ll see you later.”

A few minutes later Mano was on the radio.

“Hey, Chorty, how are you?”

“Fine. Jorge just said that we’re working tomorrow.”

“Yes, and then we can go sailing if you want to. My family is at our house in Key Biscayne.”

By this time my relationship with Mano was so secure that I could leave large amounts of money on deposit with him in one of his safe houses, which were different than the houses he lived in. And, he had set-up a house in a quiet Miami suburb specifically for my drivers, complete with a security force of armed men posted in cars at strategic locations in the neighborhood. Later that evening, after the money and drivers were secure and I was settled in my suite, there was a knock at my door. I opened it and standing with Jorge were two stunning ladies; a Florida blonde and a beautiful Chinese woman with long, black hair who was raised in London and spoke with a British accent.

After drinking and smoking weed and snorting, Jorge took the blonde into the second bedroom of the suite. The Brit and me took the master. A few hours later we were all back in the living room, saying good-bye. I noticed that Jorge was down, not his usual, unstoppable self.

“Everything all right?”

He said, “Yeah,” but I knew it wasn’t. Something was troubling him.

About a half hour later I was watching TV when I heard Jorge screaming from the large, marble bathroom.

“You son of a bitch!”

I ran over and opened the door. A pile of cocaine was on the counter. Jorge was sitting on the toilet with his pants around his ankles, slapping his erection.

“You son of a bitch! *Now* you get hard! Well, it’s too late! You motherfucker!”

The rest of 1981 went smoothly and everybody made a ton of money. On New Year's Eve, David and I hosted a grand, formal party at an exclusive French restaurant in Philadelphia that we closed for ourselves. It was cause for celebration, particularly for David. He had managed the customers and cash flow for that year and had personally made well over \$1 million. That night he proposed to his girlfriend and placed a \$50,000 ring on her finger. It was a black-tie affair. David sat at the end of a long table that was lined with guests from Philadelphia, New York and some of my friends from LA. Allen and his wife were there. I sat at the other end, facing him. Most of David's friends knew nothing of our drug empire while my friends knew everything. Earlier that year we had purchased a record company and some of the executives were also in attendance.

It was a night without drugs; a night when our world made more sense to us than ever. We believed we were good-hearted young men making millions in America and funneling it back into society via our acquisitions: several Center City office properties; a limousine company in Atlantic City, gold and silver, a boxing franchise, cars and houses and watches and extravagant gifts for friends and family. We were simply following the example of the Kennedy's during prohibition. And while cocaine would never be legalized, or ever was; the insatiable demand from every level of upper and middle-class society made it seem almost normal. But we all badly misunderstood the American dream. And as I considered the coming year; one that promised to be triple or more of what 1981 had been, I slowly started to become aware of the truth: We were criminals.

## **FCI Loretto – 1987**

After some time in prison I decided to abandon the electrician plan, devote myself to writing and work in the factory where a decent wage of \$0.11 per hour was paid to the inmates who made cable harness assemblies for US Army tanks. We were crammed in a large, open room with no heat or air conditioning. There were metal tables with work stations for soldering, pulling wire, attaching connectors, braiding and all sorts of related functions. Loud, pneumatic crimpers and presses emitted ear-piercing noise all day and left me deaf for hours. By then I was well into prison life and decided to grow my hair and not shave for the rest of my days. That decision was about a month old when the Warden entered the factory one morning with a group of high school students and their teacher who were on a tour. They formed a small circle near me as the Warden explained with pride the various used to which we were put. I felt bizarre, like a dangerous sideshow freak. The boys all had serious scowls chiseled on their faces in hopes, I guessed, of discouraging any attack. The girls were simply terrified. I desperately wanted to make contact with them and I cast a welcoming gaze at a tall girl wearing a green sweater. Eventually our eyes met. Horrified, she shuffled quickly behind a boy wearing a football jersey. I wanted to rush over and tell her not to be afraid, that this was all a terrible mistake, but her look of fear was frozen stiff. I turned away and the group moved on.

I can point to moments like this one and know that I realized something or felt something: loneliness, alienation, anger, depression and, above all, foolishness. I was foolish for not having known what became so painfully obvious; that I deserved to be there; banished from society for my actions and behavior; and that I had sentenced those who loved me to the same distance and regret. I was still in love with Karen, but through all of our years I never asked her to marry me. There were always mitigating circumstances that held me back...so I thought.

## STUBBORN ROAD

One Saturday morning in August the scraping sound of men cleaning the dry wax off of the linoleum floor outside my room woke me. This sound seemed so familiar and I searched my mind for the memory. It was a sound I heard while living in the townhouse in Philly. The wind whipped off the Delaware River and through the trees in the courtyard, lifting and releasing the metal blinds shading my open bedroom windows. My dog, Sadie, would paw at my feet each morning when I awoke, prepared for our regular wrestling match and I would oblige her whatever my condition. Then I would wonder, are there scattered glasses downstairs to collect? Is anyone sleeping in the spare bedrooms or on the couches? Are there mirrors on the tables to clean and put away? Is Karen beside me, or is it someone else that I had just met? Have I just returned from Miami or was it LA? Did I race my Porsche to Manhattan and back against David's BMW, or were we partying in Atlantic City before coming home? Or, had I spent another night in Philadelphia, expanding the boundaries of behavior in a restaurant or nightclub? I usually invited a crowd back to my townhouse to continue the party after last call. How many people were there last night? Who were they? No secrets were shared with strangers though. To them I spun a lie about being an executive in the record business, or a writer who was researching his next project.

"Willy, where do you get all of this cocaine? You never run out!"

"That isn't important. Would you care for another martini or a bottle of champagne?"

Or was it a smooth seduction? An esoteric invitation to a few close friends and well-chosen new comers to sit before the fireplace and taste the epicurean promise of white, crystalline rocks spread over a framed personal photograph of a famous rock star?

"More cognac?"

They were lonely Saturdays in the house by the river, but when I thought of the good times with Karen, romping with Sadie and the classical music pouring from my Bang & Olufsen, I know for a time I was happy. Lying on a prison bunk year's later in Loretto I found that the memory of brief happiness was an unexpected pleasure capable of carrying the whole day.

Karen had sent me a note a few days before asking me to call her one morning. We had agreed that she would tell me if a serious relationship started for her. Though she hadn't said anything yet, for months I had felt her growing distant. In prison your perceptions, undiluted, become razor sharp. After waiting half an hour to use a phone, my hands were shaking.

Karen answered and was crying.

"I have something to tell you, Willy."

"Yes?"

As she spoke the noise around me grew unbearably loud and my stomach turned and twisted. When we finished I hung-up the receiver and walked very quickly down the cement hall, pushing my way past other inmates. My only thought was to get to the ground floor and out the heavy metal door and then run, run across the tarmac and past the softball field to a little slope near a portion of razor wire fence. I sometimes sat there. A small, whitewashed house lived on the other side of the fence with a corn field surrounding it. That morning children were out front playing kick ball under a huge oak tree. I could hear



their laughter in the breeze. Fortunately, their mother didn't appear on the front porch and wave to them because I surely would have broken down. All of my past was behind me now.

## **Philadelphia – 1982**

Barely half over, May had been a tough month. The \$250,000 I had invested in our legal businesses with David evaporated without a clear explanation. A close friend and customer from California, Gregg, ran off with \$165,000 in product that I had fronted him. I shared the story of Gregg's disloyalty with Jorge. He insisted on sending hit men to recover the money...or worse. I told him not to worry; that I would handle it, but, in his mind, my credibility as a man and a drug dealer was coming into question. David, now addicted to cocaine, was a constant source of frustration. The man who ran the limousine company we had bought in Atlantic City was brutally attacked and hospitalized by the Philadelphia mafia. He gave them information about our organization and they confronted us in Philly with two ultimatums: We signed over the limo company and committed to paying them \$10,000 per week. And, three men from Columbia that supplied Mano came to Miami during one of my visits to introduce a new form of cocaine. It was called, "paste" which was the forerunner to crack (crack did not exist at this time). We had never distributed at street level where clean rock and powder sold for a minimum of \$100 a gram. This cost was unaffordable to the poor residents of inner cities. Paste was the unrefined form of cocaine. It was smoked instead of snorted and was incredibly potent. With some minor washing paste could be reduced to a street product that could be sold for \$10 a bag, creating a "dime bag" of cocaine to compete with heroin. Smuggling paste into the US meant that crack could be manufactured at local labs on a tremendous scale. This is what the Columbian's expected of Mano and me; to establish labs and utilize existing distribution. But after trying the paste, it was clear to me that the potency of the drug would ruin anyone's life if used regularly. I wanted no part of this plan, but how do you resist the Medellin cartel with impunity? I finished that run and returned to Philadelphia in turmoil. I knew that the time had come for me to quit.

It was 3:00am by the time I arrived at my townhouse. I began shouting and pounding my head against the walls as I paced up and down the five floors. Then, in a burst of conviction, I loaded all of the cocaine, ledgers, scales and all the related cut and equipment into my car and drove to one of our safe houses in old city. After securing everything there I returned to my house. In a panic, I filled a bucket with hot water and detergent and sponge-mopped the floors, walls and ceilings in every room. I cleaned every window and wiped every shade. I vacuumed every carpeted floor and all corners.

It was 11:00am. My phone kept ringing but I didn't answer it. I packed some clothing and cash then drove to a downtown hotel and checked-in.

Once settled I called Larry to tell him that I'd quit. He offered me more money. Then David paid me a visit. He just couldn't believe that I was doing this.

"Willy, this is what you've worked so hard for," he said. "This is your big year...You're going to make millions!"

"David, you don't need millions to have a good life."

He looked at me rather strangely.

“Of course, you do!” He was securely locked into the false formula of drug money’s euphoria. Somehow, I was breaking-free and was determined to see it through.

When David left I called Allen and told him my news. He was overjoyed. I told Karen. She hoped it was true. I asked another friend to look after my house and Sadie, then I phoned United Airlines. The following morning, without a morsel of cocaine in my possession, I boarded a plane to LA where my childhood friends awaited me.

## **Philadelphia - 1983-1984**

In the months that followed my resignation I tried to imagine myself a responsible man. Back in Philadelphia, I found it difficult to adjust from a lifestyle that spent thousands of dollars per month. I believed that my success and self-respect depended on gaining back my level of income in the legal world. And I had to replace all of the money that I’d lost during the years of dealing. That would make me whole, so I thought.

I spent my days wandering around Philadelphia, from investment brokers to lawyers to accountants and stockbrokers, looking for a means to secure what money I had remaining and pay the taxes due. Each day at 5:00pm, I’d mingle anonymously in upscale bars with the working professionals of Center City. I’d travel from bar to bar or, if I was especially depressed that day, go home and drink myself into a stupor. I imagined getting a job and returning to college, but there was no strength within me. I was completely burned-out, so I started seeing a psychiatrist. In a year’s time I was attending Temple University, writing every day and bartending again.

Then, in September of 1984, Larry and a host of others were indicted by the US Justice Department after a two-and-a-half-year investigation by the FBI. The Philadelphia Inquirer made Larry front page news. I read the stories with the lists of familiar names and thought to myself, “My God, it’s a good thing I quit.” It didn’t occur to me that my fate was sealed too. By December of 1984, Larry had fled the state with his family and was a fugitive. FBI agents were pressuring all those involved in the conspiracy and word came back to me that my name was at the top of their list. I tried not to worry.

## **Philadelphia – 1985**

Early in May, three years after I’d quit the cocaine business, I sat watching the rain from a criminal attorney’s office high above Center City. The attorney was a founding member of the firm and it was a handsome office, so I assumed that he was very good at his profession. Though I hadn’t received a personal visit from the FBI yet, they had called on my sister and left a message for me to contact them or else.

“Tell me about your involvement in the case,” The attorney said. I recounted my activity in great detail to which he replied, “This is very serious.”

“I’ve been out for three years,” I said.

“Well, that’s something, but let’s see what kind of charges the US Attorney is bringing.”

He called the Justice Department and after a 30-minute conversation with the Chief Prosecutor, he hung-up and took a volume from the bookcase and searched through its pages.

“Here it is,” he said. “Criminal Statute 848: Continuing Criminal Enterprise.”

“What’s that mean?”

He read for a few minutes.

“To be exactly clear, it means that if you’re convicted of operating a criminal enterprise consisting of five or more subordinates on a daily basis, you will receive no less than 10 years of imprisonment with the possibility of life in prison.”

“Am I being charged with this?”

“This,” he said, “and one count of criminal conspiracy and two counts of possession of multi-kilo amounts of cocaine with the intent to distribute them. Each of these charges carries a maximum penalty of 15 years. In total, you’re facing life in prison plus 45 years.”

My chest went numb and I couldn’t feel my heart beating. I couldn’t breathe or stop my eyes from blinking.

“Mr. Harcourt, from everything that you have told me and from what the US Attorney disclosed on the phone just now, they have enough evidence and testimony from co-conspirators to convict you on all counts. He paused and sat on the edge of his desk.

“Willy, this is the most important decision of your life and you don’t have much time. Shall I see what I can get in the way of reductions for a guilty plea? You have one hour to decide before they proceed.”

## **North Philadelphia Halfway House – 1989**

The dog outside my halfway house window has finally stopped barking and I fall asleep. I dream of driving my Porsche north into the farmlands of Bucks County. Suddenly I realize that the back seat is loaded with kilos of cocaine and the FBI is chasing me. I wake with my fists clenched.

It’s 9:00am.

I make the bed and take a shower, then get dressed and go downstairs to sign-out for my allotted eight hours of freedom. Today I’ll walk from north Philly down to South Street to see all of the changes as gentrification has taken-hold of the old neighborhoods near the river. Then I’ll catch a movie. I can’t wait to see a movie.

Outside the front door broken glass covers the sidewalk and trash fills the gaps between the burned and boarded buildings. I cross the street and pass a few elementary school kids who have collected on the corner. They curse through their sentences like angered adults.

Two blocks away I’m startled by a viscous German Shephard who storms the missing window of an abandoned house. Why is he locked-up in there? I take a few steps toward him and whistle. He goes crazy barking so I keep walking.

It’s a beautiful day.