

I was sent to jail for the first time when
I was 13. By the time I was 20, I'd sold crack,
fought in a gang war and
shot a man

The Prisoner

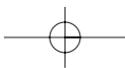
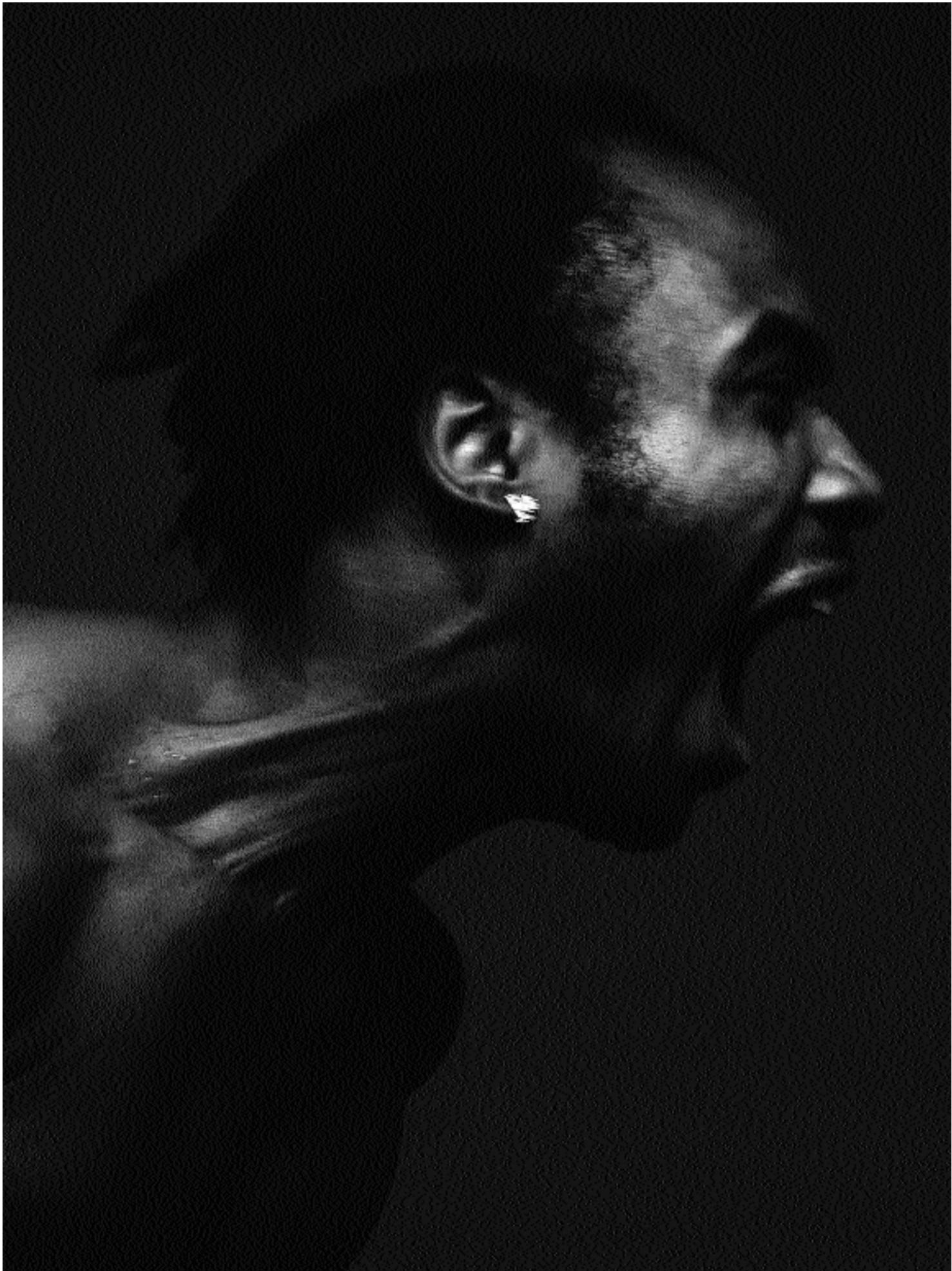
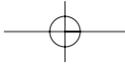
This is the story of my lost years

By **Andre Morrison**

AS TOLD TO DAVID HAYES

THE FIRST TIME I GOT IN SERIOUS TROUBLE WITH THE POLICE was a couple of weeks before Christmas 1994, when I was 13. I was living with my dad and stepmom in Mississauga, and I went into the dollar store across from the Zellers at Westwood Mall and stole some cap guns and water balloons. How I got busted was I got greedy. I went over to the Zellers for one more thing, but I didn't know that the store had a lot more cameras. When they busted me, they realized I had a lot of stuff from the dollar store, too. • My stepmother was very upset and she grounded me. But my father freaked. He said, "You think you're a man and you can embarrass me in public?" Then he gave it to me. • I ended up being charged and getting probation. I was supposed to work things out with my father, abide by his rules or I'd go to juvenile open custody. I tried my best to stay out of trouble, but a lot of the time he wouldn't let me out of the house. I felt like a caged animal. I'd sneak out just to piss him off. • I was supposed to be in school but I wasn't really going much then. I'd just hang around. I'd always seen these bigger guys, smoking cigarettes and weed. We called them "doms," the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ZIBERT



rude boys. Nobody would say nothin' to them, nobody tried to disrespect them. I wanted to be one of them, but I wasn't bad enough.

One time the doms from our school were chillin' when a whole bunch of guys from a rival school started a big scrap. By then I wasn't really scared of catching a fist, and I had so much anger in me I just wanted to knock somebody out for the fun of it. So I jumped in and started hitting these guys from the other school. I caught a broken nose and my pinkie finger got dislocated, but I held my own and lumped up a few people. From that day on, the big guys looked at me different, started giving me respect.

When I look back on those days, I know my life was getting out of control. I was knocking people down and taking from them. I'd say, "Yo, empty your pockets, give us your lunch money, gimme those sneakers or that jacket." We called it shotgun, like "I got a shotgun on that jacket." At the time, it felt good. Since no one was giving me mines, I felt I was just takin' mines.

I GUESS MY STORY REALLY STARTS WHEN I WAS LITTLE. I WAS BORN in Jamaica, the third of four kids. My father, Neville, left for Canada when my mom, Yvonne, was pregnant with me. She left for New Jersey when I was two, leaving me to live with my older brother, Wayne. I never blamed her for leaving because she was trying to help us. She scrubbed toilets and sent us whatever little money she had. The first time I saw my father was when I was three years old. He didn't come to visit me; he came to visit his friends and enjoy Ja-

later on we moved to a house. By then he had married my stepmom, Icilda—I called her Sonya. The next day was a Saturday and Sonya took me shopping. My dad came along, but only because my stepmom told him to. I was excited by all the stuff I saw. I pretty much wanted one of everything. Sonya bought me some clothes and a water gun, but by the time we got home there was already a lot of tension. My father didn't say anything to me at all, almost as if he was ashamed that I was here.

He was a big guy who worked as a mechanic and was pretty successful. (Later, he owned his own trucking company.) I don't think there's anybody who could out-drink him. He'd buy a two-four and finish it in a few hours watching the ball game. He was a gambler, too, and three times a week his friends would be over, drinking and playing dominoes.

I wasn't the smartest kid when it came to school. Because my Jamaican accent was so thick, I took ESL at Darcel Avenue Senior Public. I remember coming home with a report card and I'd got an A in gym class, which was a big thing for me. I said, "Hey Pops, look, I got an A." And all he says is, "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

When I was in Grade 7, there was this bigger boy in Grade 8 who bullied me every day. He would take away the lunch money my stepmom gave me. One day I looked at him and I saw my father, so I stabbed him in the neck with a pencil. He was sent to the hospital, and I got suspended for three months.

Later, when I ran with a gang and had been in and out of jail, my

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maica, but he said, since I have a son, I think I'll see what's goin' on. So he came by and stayed for 10 minutes, and I never saw him again until I moved to Canada nine years later.

Wayne and I lived in Tivoli Garden, a neighbourhood in Kingston. Tivoli Garden, Waterhouse, The Jungle, Rema—those are pretty much the most dangerous places around. It wasn't much of a home, more like some boards nailed together. But wherever you rest your head is home.

School costs money down there, and we didn't have any money, so half the time I was just out on the street, causing trouble. I'd climb a person's mango tree to get food. But a man's property is a man's property, so if I got caught I'd tell them I had no family, that I was living on the street. I could look someone in the face, with no smile, and just bald-faced lie and they'd actually buy it.

There were immigration problems with my mom that meant she couldn't bring me to New Jersey. In 1992, she bought me a ticket to Toronto so I could live with my father. Wayne stayed behind in Kingston. I was excited—I knew there were things that we didn't have and that I'd never seen. But after I arrived, I swear I was living in hell.

My father never showed up at Pearson to meet me, so people at the airport arranged a ride for me to his home. It was a two-bedroom apartment in a big building on Darcel Avenue, although

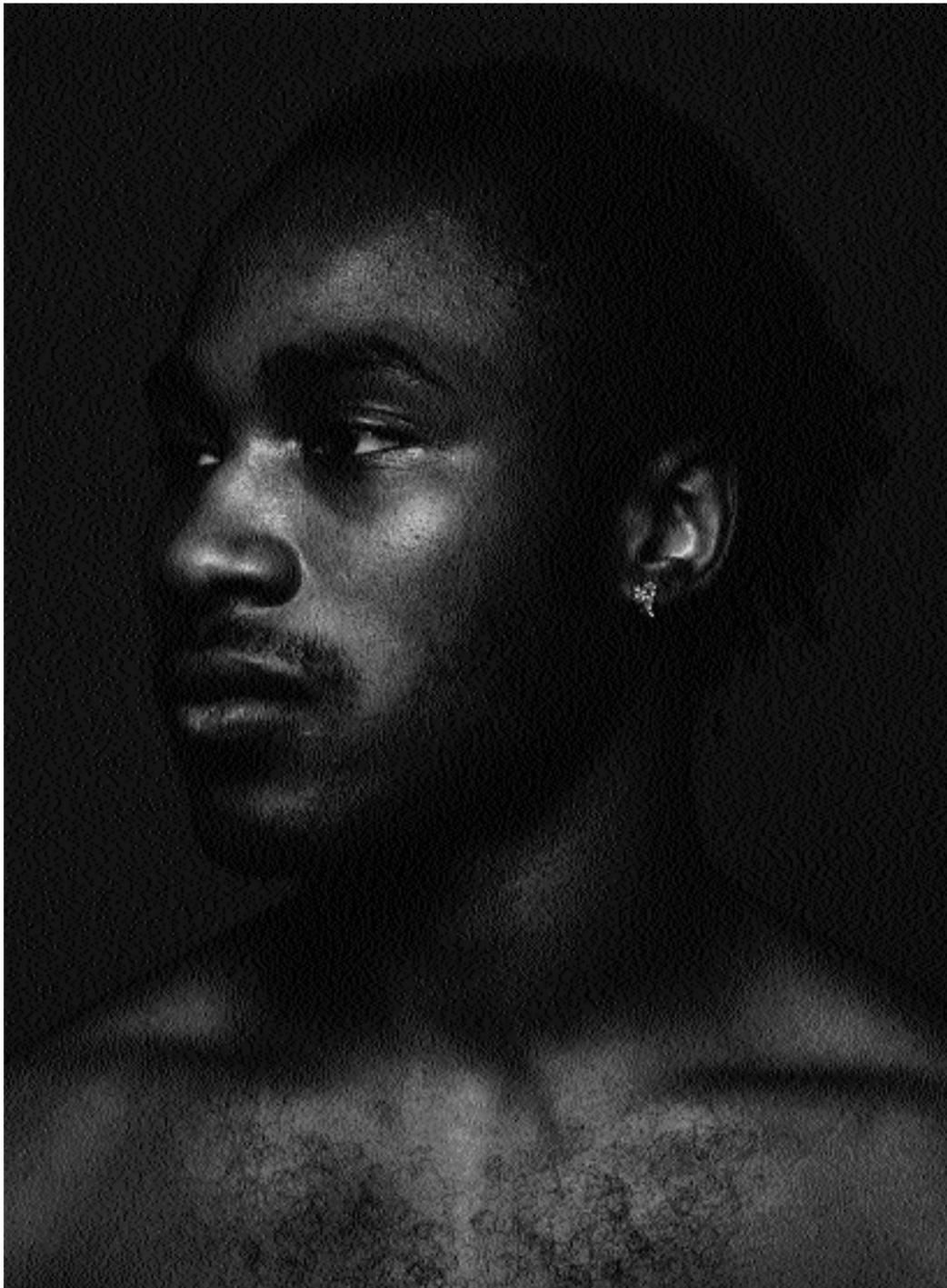
You're a big man

father would say to people, "My son is an animal." But every animal follows his parents. If you stand around and eat grass, your cubs are going to stand around and eat grass. If you are constantly hunting, your cubs are going to become hunters.

I WAS GETTING IN SO MUCH TROUBLE THAT YEAR, MY DAD GOT FED UP and said he was going to send me back to Jamaica. I couldn't stomach going back, so I ran away.

At first I stayed at my friend Jason's* place. We were like friggin' Shaq and Kobe. Like Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen. We slept in the same bed, shared the same washroom, the same food, the same bowl. We even shared the same girls. We'd go out and check out these girls who have no morals, we call them hos, and do a "battery flex"—that's basically where one girl does both of us, if you know what I mean.

Jason was probably the only person who could match me at shoplifting. I was a master of finding the spot where the cameras couldn't see, but he had very fast hands. It's called "misdirection," with one hand making you see something while the other hand is doing something else. We also broke into houses and businesses.



stolen property, but we got off with a few weeks in juvenile detention and probation.

In late August of that same summer, Jason and I broke into six houses in the Morning Star and Goreway Drive area, not far from Westwood Mall. I knew the technique. You knock on the door a couple of times. If nobody answers, you knock again, louder, seven times. *Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.* If nobody answers, nobody's home and you go about your business. You don't go in through the door because the locks are always too complicated. And unless it's a rich person who has massive safety locks, a flat-head screwdriver can usually pop the latch on any regular window. Then you crawl in.

We'd been scoping this one house with a Bentley in the driveway, and we knew the people who lived there were on vacation. So we broke in there around two in the morning and got a nice score. We both got Rolexes and about 17 rings and other jewellery, a little TV the size of a laptop. The guy was a knife collector, so we got a bunch of knives and some liquor. I filled a knapsack and Jason filled a garbage bag.

I was excited carrying all this stuff, my blood pumping, so I didn't notice when I dropped my cellphone. I discovered it was gone about half an hour later and decided it was safe to go back because the security alarm hadn't gone off at the house or anything, and besides, I needed my phone because I had impor-

tant numbers in there. But I guess one of the neighbours figured out something was wrong, and when I got there it was surrounded by cops.

I had to think fast and told them I was coming from a club in Brampton and this was my usual route home. One of the cops asked me for a receipt, and I said, "Yo, I ain't got no receipts," but I just happened to have a stamp on my hand from another jam I'd been to and I told him he could check out the club if he didn't believe me. He let me go, but he said, "If I catch you around another break and enter, your ass is grass."

So a week later I'm coming back to Jason's place at about eleven o'clock at night, on my way from checking my girl. I took a couple of back alleys and suddenly there's the same cop, but in an unmarked car this time. Turns out some idiots broke into a house near my girlfriend's place and they were investigating. He says to me, "What's

There was this Baskin-Robbins around Derry Road and Goreway Drive. These big trucks would be parked in the back and they just had a latch on them. The drivers would be off for a long time, signing in or getting lunch. We brought a trolley over one afternoon and took boxes and boxes of ice cream.

In April 1995, this guy jumped a friend of ours. He was actually kind of a nerdy kid acting like a tough guy. So Jason and I smacked him and jacked his shoes. Later that day, me and Jason were chillin' with a couple of girls at the playground in the middle of a park and we see the same dude coming toward us. We jumped off the swings and Jason had started to thump on him when I saw cruisers everywhere and cops running down the hill. We'd been set up.

I ran to one end of the park, to the apartment building my dad used to live in. I still had a key to the front entrance, so I got inside and hid. Later on the cops arrested us at our school for assault and

the chance I see you at a break and enter last week, now there's another break and enter and you're here again?"

I started making up stories, but pretty soon I was digging a grave with my tongue. Next thing I know I'm in a Peel Region police station and the bastard had my cellphone. They took my fingerprints and matched them. So the cop says, "We had this phone for a week now, Mr. Morrison. Care to explain why your phone was at a house that was robbed?"

So they charged me with break and enter and when they called my pops, he said he didn't want nothing to do with me. They gave me over four months at Delwood, in Milton. It's Phase 1, open custody, but it's still the first time I've been locked up completely. I was scared, but then I started chillin' with some guys there. For a young offender, it can rehabilitate you if you're smart enough. But I was in too deep already by then. The staff tried to get through to me, but my attitude was, "I don't know you, and I'm not gonna listen to a word you're saying to me."

IT WAS SPRING OF 1996 WHEN I WAS LET OUT OF DELWOOD. MY FATHER and stepmother had split up by then. I tried to stay at Jason's place again, but things between his parents were starting to go bad. So I ended up sleeping on the rooftop of Westwood Secondary, which is the school I would have gone to if I'd finished elementary school. I'd walk around back, climb up a tree and then jump down off a branch that hangs over the roof.

Jason brought me a big cardboard box from No Frills. We stole some duct tape from Home Hardware and taped up the box, then put a couple of rocks down so it couldn't blow over. It was cold, but that was my base for about three weeks—until it rained and I woke up to find the box soaked. So I went back to the apartment building on Darcel Avenue and slept in the top stairwell because nobody ever went up there. One time Jason brought me a little heater to plug into an outlet in the stairwell, and a mattress he found in the garbage. I kept some clothes and stuff at his place.

One day we went to the Brampton City Centre, and I stole 16 reggae CDs from the Music World. I stashed those CDs outside, but then I had to be greedy and go back. They caught me this time and sent me back to open custody at the Delwood Program. I was sort of used to going in and out of jail by now, but I didn't know that things were going to get more serious. I got in a scuffle with a guy and they transferred me to closed custody at Syl Apps Youth Centre in Oakville, which is maximum security youth detention, where they send the guys who've assaulted or killed someone. It's basically the same as an adult jail. I went in a petty criminal, but I learned so much from guys in there that I came out a gangster. I got tough.

There are rules of survival in jail. When you first come in they call you a new fish. You have to pick on another new fish to earn some stripes, to survive. You're still not in the big boys' league, but they won't pick on you. If you won't fight back, or you rat on somebody, the guards put you in PC, protective custody. Once you're known as PC, you're screwed in any jail because the message travels.

I got beat up, jumped two against one, three against one. I got my head smashed. It's a horrible feeling, and I got so frustrated after awhile that I just didn't care. I figured, yo, I'm not gonna get beat up no more.

They give you short toothbrushes and I'd sharpened one by rubbing it on both sides against the wall. You put it up your sleeve and fasten it to your wrist with an elastic band—that way the staff don't find it when they pat you down. At lunch, a guy was going on like he was tough, and then he tried to hit me in the head with a metal lunch tray. I ducked, then stabbed him one time right in the chest. He wasn't too seriously hurt, but was put in protective custody. For

that, I got sent to solitary, and when I was let out some little guy tried to jump me. I beat him up and got locked down again. Another time in the gym, two brothers scuffled with me. The guards waded in, but this guy hit me right on the jaw—razzled and dazzled me a bit. The staff jumped on him and threw him to the ground. I saw my chance and—bam—stomped on his head twice, mashed the corner of his jaw. So I got 20 days lockdown for that one. When I finally got out, the news had spread: I was a badass.

IN JUNE, WHEN I WAS 14, I'D BEEN OUT OF JAIL FOR AWHILE AND decided to look up a guy I'd heard about in jail. Sean lived in Oakville, in a building behind a Coffee Time not too far from Syl Apps. He's a small white guy, but really strong. He was into some really heavy stuff, and ran the local chapter of a gang in the Oakville area called the Shanghi Murderers. You never see the main leaders, but Sean would answer to a dude in Hamilton who would answer to someone in Buffalo. Hanging out, I became one of them. It was a bunch of brethren chillin' together.

Sean had a lot of guns in his apartment. The first one I held was a 9 millimetre. I just wanted to feel big, you know? Even if you're a little kid, if you have a weapon on you, if you can feel it on your waist, you feel like you're 29 years old. You're a big man.

He had a couple of 9 millimetres, a Tec-9, a Ruger and a grenade. One time he showed me his Desert Eagle, which is supposed to be the most powerful handgun around. The only one he never let me try was an AK-47 with a banana clip—there's no way you could hide that thing, even under a trench coat. The first gun I walked around with was a sawed-off Winchester, the "pumpy."

The guns were mostly for show. Me and the little guys just did your basic robberies, convenience stores and stuff. Three people go in the store and pretend to be shopping. One walks down underneath one camera and the other goes to the other camera. The two guys jump up and rip the cameras down, then the third guy says, "Gimme everything!" to the clerk.

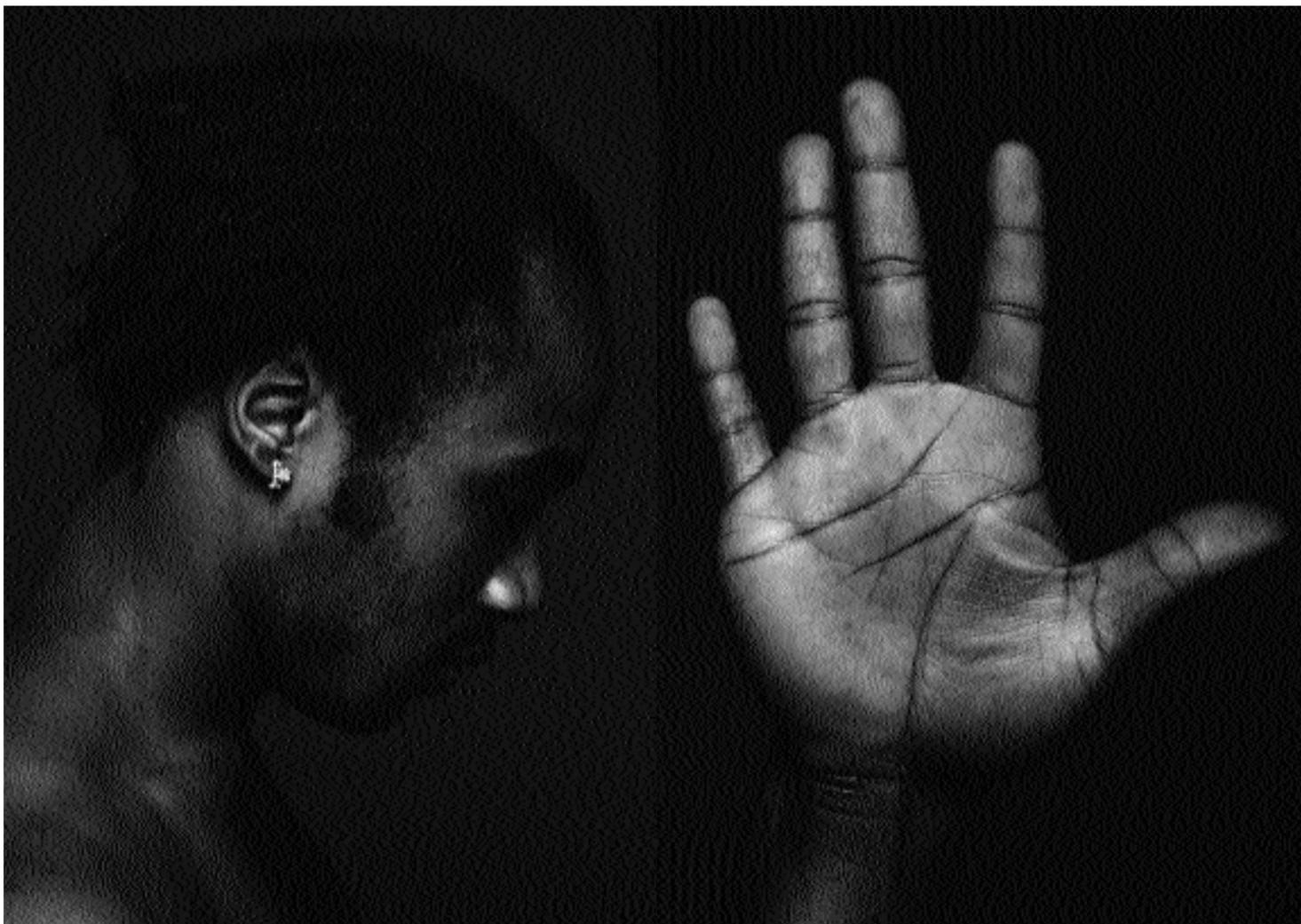
Once, we got into a big gang war in Brampton between us and the Vice Lords. We were Crips and the Vice Lords were Bloods. One day Sean says to us, "Yo, strap up, let's ride." You know, once a man says, "Strap up," it's beef—a war.

We met at Chinguacousy Park in Brampton at 11 that night. There was about 40 of us and we got there in 13 cars. I took the 9 millimetre with me. A lot of these guys come strapped just in case one of our guys might be stupid enough to shoot one of them. But it's supposed to be a scrap, a fist fight, maybe one or two bricks.

We parked a couple of blocks down and walked to the park. People are sleeping by then, and if you're awake you know enough to stay out of it. We went to where a whole bunch of guys were standing around, wearing red. Then Sean and the other leader walked towards each other and shared a moment of conversation. I saw the Vice Lord leader look around like he's saying something to one of his boys. Then he cracked Sean. So Sean threw one back, and then everyone just charged in. It was a royal rumble.

We were winning and were about to leave when one of their guys got stupid and pulled out his thing and shot one of our little guys. Then everybody pulled 'em out and there was bullets flying all over the place. I couldn't really tell you if I shot anybody, to be honest, because it was dark. But this one guy I shot at went down. I didn't kill him, though, because he limped away, his friend helping him. It's a good thing those guys didn't bring any really big tools. Then there were sirens coming, so everybody scattered.

When we got back to Sean's we were scared as hell. I had that nervous, whacked-out feeling inside. I even got Sean a cup of juice and the juice was shakin' in his hand.



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I ENDED UP LEAVING THE GANG BECAUSE I WANTED TO GET MY LIFE together. It's not always easy to do, but Sean was a good friend, and as our leader he thought I'd earned my dues. Eventually I went to Hamilton with a friend, because there was stuff happening there. We end up staying with this Colombian guy called Loco. He was a nice person, but a pretty dangerous guy, too. He wasn't part of a gang, but he was slingin' drugs like crazy. Crack. Heroin. Special K. You sniff Special K and after half an hour you get into something called the "K hole." You're literally paralyzed for an hour.

That was the first time I was seriously into selling drugs. I needed the money and didn't want to steal to get it. One time we arranged to sell some weed to these guys, but the idea was to rob them. Unfortunately they were a little bit smarter than we assumed. Me and Loco and a couple of friends met them at this small plaza on

Hamilton's Main Street. It was dark and we moved out back. They were supposed to come put their money right by me, and Loco brings the drugs over to them. But they hesitated. They're like, "Nah, nah. You first. Bring the drugs over here." Loco put his hand on his waist, because he felt like he needed to grip his tool right away. They pulled out theirs and started shooting. I got out of there, but a bullet grazed my right side. I went to Hamilton General Hospital, but I told them somebody stabbed me.

When I left the hospital I saw a cop drive by and look at me. He must have recognized me, because there were a lot of charges against me by this time and my picture was circulating. Next thing I knew, the guy came out with a gun. You can't run when a cop has a gun on you, and I wasn't feeling 100 per cent coming out of the hospital, anyway. He took me in and at court the judge gave me two and

a half years closed custody for 15 armed robbery charges, break and enters, grand theft auto and disturbing the peace, plus an additional year and a half open custody. I thought, oh my goodness, I'm not coming out until I'm 20 years old!

They sent me back to Syl Apps—this was my eighth time in jail. The first six months were very stressful. I swear, I felt like dying quite a few times because I realized that my life had come to a complete mess.

Back then I was a scrapper—I had no fear of nothing. All I did was eat, shit and lift weights. I'd be doing 200 pounds, 100 reps a day. I was a monster, weighed about 225. (Now I'm only 178 or 179.) One time I was playing ping-pong in the prison gym. There were these two particular guys who'd been eyeing me. Right before the gym closed, these guys rushed me from behind. The smaller one came first and I grabbed his hand and pounded him onto the ping-pong table. The other had his hand around my throat, and it felt like he was breaking my neck. I slumped a bit, then rolled both of us down on that table, with me on top. He busted his head and I busted my nose.

Someone had hit the emergency button, and all you hear in the whole building is *DE DE DE DE DE*. About 20 staff rushed down and restrained us. They threw me in solitary—I called it the black hole. It's nasty; all you can smell is feces. After that, they sent me to do nine

So the months go by and one day, on February 14, 2000, she called me to the front office. I remember that day like it was Christmas. "You're free to go, Andre," she said. I was like, "Free to go where?" I didn't know it was my discharge day. I had tears in my eyes because I was so happy, but at the same time I was scared because I had no idea what I was going to do when I got outside. I'd spent four years in jail and it had become my life; I knew nothing else. I didn't want to leave and Anna got really concerned. She told me if I didn't leave she would call the cops and I would be arrested. "Do you want that, Andre?" she asked me. "You're free. Go be somebody. Don't let me down." And honestly, I never forgot those words.

There are a lot of things I regret about my past life. But I did my time and I took my punishment. Now I think I understand right from wrong.

So she gave me my things. There wasn't much, a couple of pants, a couple of shirts, Timberland boots. I didn't even have a jacket.

I stayed at Covenant House for a few weeks, and I hooked up with a couple of old friends. But I saw myself heading into trouble again, so I dropped those friends. I went to another shelter, Eva's Phoenix in Parkdale, where you can stay for a full year. I worked a bit, at Wendy's and Taco Bell.

Since I've been out of jail I've taken part in the city's Violence Intervention Project. They taught me anger management and con-

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Jail is worse than death

months closed custody, Phase 2 at the Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre—we called it Barton. Phase 2 is a whole different ball game. I ended up getting in fights almost every week. I got stabbed a couple of times in the head and stomach—still have the scars.

All through these years I used to call my mom in New Jersey. I felt like I was going crazy, and I thought about hanging myself quite a few times. She tried to keep me sane and convince me that everything will be alright. I started writing poetry and music as a way of expressing myself. I had to find a little peace within myself.

When I finally finished my period of closed custody, I did eight months of open custody, most of it at the Dovercourt Youth Home. We'd play sports and occasionally go on outings. We'd go for school courses held in a church, and the staff would take us to movies. The idea was to try to bring us back into the population.

We had a youth worker named Anna who was in her 20s, Portuguese and very beautiful. She was short and always wore these tight little skirts. Man, she was fine—I was always trying to give her the eye, like, me and you, yo? She'd just giggle.

I looked forward to her coming—it brightened my day. When she talks to you, she actually talks some sense into you. She convinced me that it's not good to do bad things. You have to look at the brighter side of life, as simple as that.

flict resolution. All about diversity, bullying, gang violence, dating violence, how to see a toxic relationship, how to speak to someone who has different feelings than you have, how to understand empathy. I met the mayor once, worked on a youth education campaign, and took part in teen summits on gangs and teen issues. I'm taking high school equivalency courses. I plan to take the Child and Youth Worker program at Centennial College.

I've been out for six years now. I heard the Vice Lords eventually came for Sean and shot him, messed him up. I haven't seen or heard from him, but I guess he's still out there doing his thing.

I've been struggling. I got in a fight with my girlfriend and now I'm facing assault charges. I share a house with four roommates in Malvern, no food in my fridge. Social assistance only gives me \$520 a month. Once I pay my rent and Metropass to get around, so I can apply for jobs or whatever, I have \$26 left. I've slept on the streets and I've lived in shelters. I've had people call me a bum. I've thought about how easy it would be to go out and rob someone. But I don't want to go back to jail. There are things much worse than death, and jail is definitely one of them. When you're in jail, your hopes and your dreams are dead.

Sometimes I think about my father and how I couldn't hate anyone more than I hate him. I still think about taking his life. The last time I saw him, right after I'd come out of prison, I told him, "Yo, you ain't my father. You're just another guy on the street." I haven't seen him since.

END