

INTRODUCTION

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It was a cool, crisp Chicago evening in September of 1985. I was feeling kind of good about myself because I had just pulled off, what I thought was, one of the sweetest con games I had played in a long time. It would keep me out of jail and put some money in my pocket at the same time. That was what I did for a living. I played games on people that separated them from their money or their merchandise. But I wasn't a big time con man like the guys in the movie "The Sting" or the men Iceberg Slim talked about in his book, "Trick Baby." I wasn't trying to be either. At that stage of my life, I was just trying to get enough money to feed my \$200.00 a day drug habit. When I say \$200.00, that's just an average. There were many days that I spent well over \$500.00, and there were some days that I couldn't even raise a hundred.

I was sitting in my living room that evening watching Smokey Robinson's new TV program with my brother, Ralph. We called him "Weasel," because he was short and fast. We all had nicknames in my neighborhood. Mine was "Bub", short for Bubba. My childhood friend, Richie, gave it to me. His favorite baseball player was Bubba Philips, the former third baseman for the Chicago Cubs. Richie's family was one of the last white families to move out of the neighborhood.

Ralph and I have always been close. We've had our differences over the years, but what brothers don't? We used to love to get together and watch sports on TV or listen to some jazz while we were getting high. Ralph didn't shoot up like I did. As a matter of fact, he hated for me to do it. But that was my thing, "Speed balling." Speed balling is mixing heroin and cocaine together and either shooting or snorting it.

Ralph's thing was smoking crack. They called it freebasing back then because they would take some cocaine, mix it with baking soda and water, and then cook it in a test tube. Most people had never heard of freebasing until Richard Pryor almost burned himself up while he was doing it. After that, everybody wanted to try it. But that just goes to show you the mentality of the average drug user. If someone died of an overdose because they had some

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drugs that were too strong, everybody wanted some of that, because they knew it had to be some good stuff.

To me, freebasing was just wasting good cocaine. So whenever Ralph and I got together, we would just drink whisky and beer, and smoke reefer. That's what we were doing when the doorbell rang. Ralph started towards the door, but I thought it might have been Shelia, my lady friend at the time, so I decided to answer it myself. The building we lived in was the two family flat where we had grown up. My father lived on the first floor, and Ralph and I lived upstairs.

When I got to the door, I pulled back the shade and saw two policemen standing on the porch. One of them was in uniform; the other one was a detective. I figured they were there to arrest me, but I wasn't worried. I was sure I could talk them out of it; I had done it many times before. When I turned the lock and pushed the door open, I put on my best smile.

I didn't even get the door completely open before one of my hands was cuffed and I was being pulled out onto the front porch. They finished handcuffing me and informed me that they had a warrant for my arrest. As I was being taken away, I noticed they had come in different cars. The uniformed officer was a Chicago city policeman. The detective was from one of the suburbs and had to be accompanied by a city officer in order to serve a warrant inside of the city limits. I was put in the car and taken to Oak Park, Illinois.

While I was being booked, I found out that the sweet con game I had played earlier that day had backfired. I didn't know that the manager of the store where I had passed some bad checks at earlier in the week had found out how I operated. So while I was planning phase two of my con, he was at the police station filing charges against me. I also found out that I had another warrant from another suburb, so my bond was \$11,000. I needed \$1,100 to get out of jail. I didn't have it.

When I got to my cell, I thought I was in "Jail Heaven." I had never been in a hold-over cell like that in my life, and I had been in a lot of them. Most of them were crowded, noisy, open cells with cold steel benches. Most of the time the benches were so

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crowded, prisoners had to sleep on the floor. And you had to wait forever for someone to let you out to use the phone.

This was more like a single room. It was nice and warm, and there was a bed in there with a mattress, a pillow, and a blanket. There was a telephone in there too. When I looked around, I realized I had been hanging out in the wrong jails. I decided right then, that from that point on, I was going to commit all of my crimes in the suburbs, preferably Oak Park. Prisoners had it going on out there.

I talked on the phone most of the night. But I wasn't calling people, trying to get bond money; I was calling to tell them about that fancy jail cell I was in. One of the people I called was Sandi, an ex girlfriend of mine who lived in St. Louis. Although we were no longer together, we still remained friends, kind of. You've got to remember, I still had the mind of a hustler and a con. Sandi was a beautiful, loving woman. But she came into my life at the wrong time. I had been hurt by so many women, my heart had become calloused. I had decided that I was going to be the one doing the hurting. Unfortunately, Sandi was one of my victims. She really didn't deserve that.

We tend to do that to each other sometimes. We are so focused on our own hurt feelings that we don't see the pain that we are causing someone else. It's kind of like an automobile accident. Even if the accident is our fault, the first thing we do is look at the damage that was done to our car. We are not that concerned about the other person's car. It is the same when we sin against God. The first thing we do is look at how it has damaged our lives. We are not really concerned with how we hurt the God who loves us.

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't believe the breakfast they gave me. It was an Egg McMuffin with a hash brown and orange juice from the McDonald's next door. All we ever got for breakfast in the city jails was a stale, dried-up Honey Bun.

I went to court later that morning and was bound over for trial. Since I was not able to make bond, I was sent to the Cook County Jail. That is where people are held until they either bond out or go to court. If you are convicted in court and sentenced to

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do time, you might do it there if your sentence is one year or less. Anything over a year, including one day, you go to the penitentiary.

The county jail is located on the corner of 26th and California Street. Ironically, it is only two blocks from my old high school, Carter H. Harrison, which was located on 24th and California Street.

After a brief stay in Division 5, I was moved to Division 2. That was the minimum-security section of the jail. It is a two-story building with two open dorms on each floor. There were about 40 or 50 inmates in each dorm. The older, more mature prisoners were housed on the first floor. The second floor was known as "Gladiator School." It was reserved for the "Thunder Cats." Those were the young gang bangers who spent most of their time fighting. We could hear them throwing beds, tables, chairs, benches, and everything else that wasn't nailed down. Sometimes it sounded like they were coming through the floor. If anyone on the first floor got out of hand or gave one of the C.O.s (Correctional Officers) any trouble, they were transferred upstairs to Gladiator School.

I learned something while I was in Cook County. The C.O.s didn't really run the jail. The gangs did. The C.O.s controlled the overall system as far as telling the inmates what to do and when to do it, therefore, maintaining some sense of order. But when it came to the individual dorms or wings or cellblocks, they were definitely run by the gangs. I learned that the minute I stepped into "D" dorm.

There were three of us that were taken to "D" dorm. The first person I saw when we walked in was Cochise. He was tall, thin, and crazy looking. He was not wearing a shirt and his pants were hanging well below his waist with his boxers showing, although "sagging" was not yet in style back then. He had another inmate pinned against the wall and was all up in his face. Then he threw him across the room onto the floor and shouted, "If you ever do that again, I'll tear your head off." Then he looked over at us and said, "What ya'll looking at?" We just turned and went our separate ways, looking for the bunks we were assigned.

I later found out that Cochise was the "shot caller" for "Folks" in "D" dorm. "Folks" is a group of Chicago area gangs

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that are united. The inmate that Cochise was beating up was a member of “Peoples,” another group of gangs, and the arch enemies of “Folks.” In “D” dorm, “Folks” out numbered “Peoples” 10 to 1.

During that time, in the Chicago jail and prison system, there were three categories of inmates, Peoples, Folks, and Neutrons. Neutron is another word for neutral, meaning they were not in either gang. Neutrons were the minority. Ain’t that something? Being black, I had been a minority all of my life. Now, there I was in the Cook County Jail where almost everyone was black, and I was still a minority. That wasn’t the first time I had been locked down, so I was able to adjust.

The brother in the bunk next to mine slept all of the time. He would get up when it was time to go to the mess hall to eat, but when he got back to the dorm, he just went right back to sleep. I knew how it was; street life can take its toll on you. Sometimes the police are really doing some people a favor when they lock them up. That’s the only time they get any rest. So in a sense, they didn’t arrest us, they rescued us.

Prison is a culture of hardness. You can never show any sign of weakness or fear. If you do, the predators will sense it, and they will be on you like a pack of dogs. If you are challenged in any way, you must meet it head on. Smart inmates try to avoid certain situations and certain people. Their goal is to do their time and stay away from trouble. But if trouble comes to them, they deal with it.

On my second day in “D” dorm, I was lying across my bunk. Since it was an open dorm, I made it a habit to always lie on my back. I didn’t want anyone looking at my booty and getting any crazy ideas. We had just returned from lunch and I didn’t want to watch TV. As I stated earlier, the gangs controlled the jail, and that included the TV set. They liked to watch the soaps after “Oprah” and the other morning programs went off.

I was just lying there with my blanket over my face trying to keep the light out of my eyes. I didn’t want to see anyone and I didn’t want anyone to see me. I was angry and feeling sorry for myself. My birthday was coming up soon and it was beginning to look like I would be spending another one of them in jail. I was really getting tired of that.

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I heard Cochise's voice. He was talking to one of his soldiers. I heard their footsteps and their voices coming closer and closer. I started praying, "Please Lord, let them keep going." But they stopped right by my bunk. I had spent two days trying to avoid this crazy man, and now he was standing over me, with Larry, his right hand man. All of a sudden it got real hot under that blanket. I was sweating and praying and making all kinds of deals with God.

While they were standing there, I heard Larry say, "Who is that?" Cochise said, "That's just some old preacher that's running from God." Then I heard them walking away. That messed me up. I had been a preacher, but I had quit years ago. I didn't know how Cochise knew. God had called me to preach, but I didn't want to do it anymore. So Cochise was right when he said I was running from God. I was a fugitive, but I wasn't the only one. Our jails and prisons are full of fugitives. Some of them are fugitives, running from justice. Some of them are fugitives running from God.

My friend, Richie, had a little brother named Michael. When we were younger, Michael used to aggravate some of us older boys and then run into his house before we could catch him. Once, Michael did something that made me angry, but that day I caught him before he was able to get home, and I beat the mess out of him.

Afterwards, it dawned on me that I had one little brother, but Michael had four big brothers, so I ran home. That evening, while we were eating dinner, the doorbell rang. Thinking it was Michael's brothers, I jumped up and ran out the back door. My father caught up with me and asked what was going on. After I told him what had happened, he said, "Son, when you are in trouble, you are supposed to run to your house, not away from your house."

That is how Satan tricks us. When we mess up or get into trouble, we leave the church because of embarrassment or we don't know if we will be forgiven. But that is the time that we should run to God and to the church, instead of running from them.

Later that night, we were all sitting around watching TV when Cochise called me off to the side. He said, "What are you doing in here Preacher? You don't belong here." I started telling

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him about my crimes and some of the things I had done, trying to impress him and show him how bad I was, but he just started laughing. He said, "You know you ain't suppose to be doing that stuff."

I went back to my seat and started watching TV again. Just then, one of the C.O.s came in and handed Cochise bags of food. Some of the C.O.s were gang members that had never been arrested. All of the gang members started making sandwiches and eating. It had been a long time since dinner, and I was hungry too. But I wasn't part of the gang. Cochise looked up from his sandwich and said, "Hey Preacher, are you hungry?" When I said that I was, he told someone to give me a sandwich. But what they gave me was a jailhouse donut and some bread. I'd had one of those donuts in the mess hall before; they were terrible. They were not sweet at all.

I was looking at the donut and bread wondering, "What am I supposed to do with this?" when Cochise asked me if I had ever had a donut sandwich before. I replied, "No." He told someone to show me how to make one. I thought they were playing a joke on me. Someone told me to put some butter and jelly on the bread, put the donut in between. I tried it. It was great.

We were given donuts at least twice a week with our breakfast. From then on I always made sandwiches with them. Whenever we had something for lunch or dinner that I didn't like, I would trade it with another inmate for their donut sandwich. My niece, Christine, teases me because to this day, I still eat them. Donut sandwiches.

After everyone had eaten that night, Cochise called me in front of everybody. He said, "Hey ya'll. This is 'Preacher'. He ain't Folks. He's a Neutron, but he's alright. I don't want nobody messing with him." So that became my name while I was in the Cook County Jail. Preacher. Cochise and I got to be pretty good friends. I asked him how he knew I had been a preacher? He said, "Anybody can look at you and tell you're a preacher." I didn't realize it at the time, but even in jail, God had His hand on me and was protecting me.

A few weeks later, detectives came to the jail and arrested me. Again. It was the dumbest thing I had ever heard of. How can

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you arrest someone who is already in jail? It turned out that while I was in jail, stores in two other suburbs had pressed charges against me, so they added another \$50,000 to my ransom, and moved me to Division 4, the more secure section of the jail. Things had gone from bad to worse. I figured God was angry with me, but I didn't think He was *this* angry.

Why was He so angry with me? After all, nobody's perfect. At least that's what I had always heard. The truth is, we do not live in a perfect world, and God did not create a perfect people. When God created man, He gave us the ability to choose how we live our lives. He gave us a tongue that can lie, a heart that can hate, hands that can kill, and thoughts that can lust. We were not born with a mouth that will not say things that hurt, or feet that will not follow the path of unrighteousness. We are however, blessed with a mind that can discern right from wrong.

The name Preacher followed me to Division 4. But something happened while I was in there that changed my life forever. Before I tell you about that, I want to go back a few years and tell you the story of how I became, "The Hoodlum Preacher."