

MY LIFE AS A COCAINE COWBOY

# AMERICAN DESPERADO



'THE FIRST GREAT CRIME BOOK OF  
THE 21ST CENTURY' JERRY STAHL

JON ROBERTS  
& EVAN WRIGHT  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF **GENERATION KILL**

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## About the Book

During the 1980s criminal legend Jon Roberts was the no.1 supplier of cocaine in the US, smuggling over 15 billion dollars-worth. But that is only the start of his extraordinary dark tale...

A real-life Scarface, Jon was born into the Gambino mafia family and witnessed his first murder aged seven. To escape a teen criminal charge he agreed to join a US army assassination squad in Vietnam. Returning to New York he became one of the city's top nightclub promoters until he was forced to flee to Miami. There he reinvented himself as the de facto transportation chief of the Medellín Cartel and, along with a tech-wizard partner, created some of the most sophisticated smuggling technologies ever. With a crazed bodyguard always at his side, and a fortress protected by mortars, tear-gas cannons and a gold-fanged attack dog, Roberts was brutally effective at what he did.

To law enforcement, he was the "Bearded Gringo", a spectre they could never touch. To the CIA, he was "the guy who can get things done". With a cast that includes everyone from Jimi Hendrix and OJ Simpson, to General Noriega and Pablo Escobar, American Desperado is the most jaw-dropping, adrenaline-soaked criminal autobiography you'll ever read.

*ALSO BY EVAN WRIGHT*

*Generation Kill*

*Hella Nation*

# AMERICAN DESPERADO

MY LIFE AS A COCAINE COWBOY

JON ROBERTS  
& EVAN WRIGHT



EBURY  
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**TO NOEMI AND JULIAN**



*MORE PRAISE FOR AMERICAN DESPERADO*

**“A tour de force. The best crime book since *Wiseguy*.** Puts you in the middle of a world where it’s wonderful to be a tourist, terrible to be a resident. I am filled with nothing but admiration and envy for Evan Wright. If I thought I could get away with it, I would off Mr. Wright and present the book as my own. But as this story shows, no one really gets away with anything.”

—RICH COHEN,  
*New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *When I Stop Talking, You’ll Know I’m Dead* and author of *Tough Jews*

**“*American Desperado* is the kind of book crime novelists envy, because it is not only stranger but so much better than fiction.** Evan Wright brings the same immediacy and vigor that lifted *Generation Kill* above the many accounts of the Iraq War—only here he gets unfettered access not to the good guys, but to one incredibly bad one. **Captivating, addictive, and head spinning, this one-of-a-kind book earns its place on the top shelf of true-crime accounts.”**

—CHUCK HOGAN,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Standoff* and *Prince of Thieves* (basis of the Academy Award-nominated *The Town*)

**“*American Desperado* is one of the most disturbing memoirs I’ve ever read...** Like many sociopaths, Roberts is a totally charming storyteller,

thanks in great part to his coauthor, journalist Evan Wright, who does a brilliant job getting into Roberts's scary head and letting him tell his tale, as well as vetting his nearly unbelievable life story.... **I never want to be in the same room with Jon Roberts, but I couldn't stop reading his book.**"

—STEVEN GAINES,  
*New York Times* bestselling author of *Philistines at the Hedgerow* and *Fool's Paradise*

**"Seldom have I read an account of criminal enterprise that took me so deeply into the blackness of a man's soul—a scary read, pounding and relentless and irresistible."**

—BRUCE PORTER,  
author of *Blow*

*Desperado, the horse that I thought would win the Derby and make me famous as something more than a gangster, was a baby when I got him. He hadn't been trained how to run, but he could already fly on the grass. He had good instincts. He didn't like other horses. You don't want a sociable horse. They stay in the pack. You want a horse who likes to run in front of all the other horses. Desperado was a killer. I named him Desperado because I saw myself in his eyes.*

**—JON ROBERTS**

# *1*

## ***APRIL 2008—MIAMI***

EVAN WRIGHT (E.W.): During a break in the Heat versus Pistons game at Miami's American Airlines Arena, an announcer informs the crowd that a "very special celebrity" is in the house. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have Jon Roberts, Miami's original cocaine cowboy, with us tonight."

Live images of Roberts seated in the arena splash onto the screens in the arena: a physically fit sixty-year-old with silver hair combed straight back. Unaware that he is being filmed, Roberts gazes expressionlessly. Deepset eyes give his face a wolfish, predatory appearance. Fans seated near him stand with their camera-phones and take aim. Roberts notices his image on the screens and offers a pained okay-you-got-me grin. He puts his arm on his eight-year-old son, Julian, seated beside him. Julian ducks his head into his father's shoulder but peeks up, grinning, as cameras flash. His dad is the biggest star in the arena.

Little more than fifteen years earlier Roberts was a fugitive. His face was featured on FBI most-wanted posters at U.S. post offices across North America. He fled Miami after the U.S. government labeled him as top "American representative" of the Medellín Drug Cartel and charged him with overseeing the importation of billions of dollars of cocaine. Roberts and a small band of American partners

had created a veritable FedEx of drug smuggling. They employed secret airfields, listening posts to eavesdrop on Coast Guard communications, and sophisticated homing beacons for tracking cocaine shipped by sea that stymied the U.S. government for nearly a decade. That part of Roberts's story—and the outrageous life he led that epitomized the excesses of Miami's cocaine-fueled boom of the 1980s—was told in the underground hit documentary *Cocaine Cowboys*, released in 2006.

Key aspects of Roberts's extraordinary criminal life remained untold—his rise in a powerful New York Mafia clan, the murders that prompted his exile to Miami, his involvement with a CIA official that led to a secret plea deal with the government.

Through it all, he possessed an asset not typical of admitted killers: charm. A man who did business with Roberts in his New York Mafia days—and later joined the priesthood as a result of the experience—told me, “Jon was extremely likable. He was fun to be around. Underneath that was a person capable of very bad things. He is an extreme dichotomy of good and bad. He is a very old story, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

Roberts's frankness about himself—usually blended with a sly, sardonic humor—can be disarming. In a phone call before we met to discuss telling his full story, he said, “I might be a sociopath. Most of the time I've been on this earth I've had no regard for human life. That's been the key to my success.”

I arrive in South Florida the spring of 2008 to begin interviewing Roberts for this book. He insists that I stay with him and his wife, Noemi, and son, Julian, at their house in Hollywood, Florida. He insists that I not rent a car. He'll pick me up. He'll drive, always. “I don't ever want to be in a car with somebody else driving it,” he explains.

Jon's accent is New York, but not the tough-guy dialect of the streets. He speaks an urbane New Yorkese, like Michael Douglas's Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*. We do many hours of interviews in Jon's car, visiting old haunts—bars, smugglers' docks, murder scenes—with time out to pick up Julian at school and shuttle him to playdates and hockey practice.

When Julian is in the car, Jon drives at the proper speed and questions him about school, like any other involved parent. When Jon and I are alone in the car, he reverts to old habits. He seems to drive his car, a late-model Cadillac, at only two speeds, 75 mph on surface streets and 110 mph on freeways. As he darts in and out of traffic and squeals out of parking lots, driving with Jon feels like being dropped into a car-chase scene in a 1970s movie. I glimpse the rearview mirror, expecting to see elaborate car crashes in our wake and flashing red lights. But Jon is a precise high-speed driver, never reckless. Rocketing toward a parking space, he flicks the wheel with one hand and backs in. He always parks his car facing out, primed for a quick getaway.

Jon's home is an expansive Spanish modern, set against a lake on the Inland Waterway. Before we enter, he clips blossoms from a jasmine vine, then places them in a vase in the front hall. A friend from his New York days tells me that Jon has always liked flowers. "In his apartments he always had a bowl of water with a gardenia blossom floating in it."

Jon's hospitality is obsessive. Before my arrival he phoned me on a morning when I happened to be eating blueberries. Now a fresh basket of blueberries waits for me in the refrigerator. Every time I visit there will be blueberries.

In the Roberts household, Jon does the cooking—French toast for breakfast, pasta and baked fish for dinner. Unless there is an NBA game on, or a new episode of *Two and a*

*Half Men*—his favorite show—meals are eaten at the long, plank-wood dining table. Noemi is responsible for setting it.

She is an energetic presence, thirty years younger than he. Noemi is African on her father's side and Hungarian on her mother's. She and Jon met shortly after she arrived in America, when she was training in a Miami park for a triathlon. There is an athletic bounce to her movements, and she speaks in an exuberant, bubbling accent—not always easily understood. She pulls me aside before my first dinner in the house and says, “I adore Jon. But the day I met him, he touched me and my body went numb, because his energy is black. Jon is not human. I love him, but I live as his prisoner. I cannot leave him because his evil is magnetic.”

Overhearing his wife's commentary, Jon offers a *Father Knows Best* laugh. “Please, Noemi. You'll spoil his appetite.”

Jon's older sister, Judy, who lives nearby, is a frequent dinner guest. A graduate of Emerson College, Judy was a personnel director at a large New York company while Jon pursued his criminal career. After the birth of Julian (by Jon's previous wife), Judy moved to Florida to help raise him. In her mid-sixties, Judy is slim and stylish. At the dinner table she speaks in a calming voice, directed at Julian when he mumbles about his schoolwork, then at Jon when he shouts at Julian for mumbling. “Let him speak in his own voice, Jon,” she scolds.

Jon shakes his head and sighs, surrendering to his sister.

Julian smiles. You get the idea that agitating Jon is something he likes.

After dinner Jon and Julian shoot hoops in the driveway. When Julian runs for a layup, Jon grabs him and swings him in the air, closer to the rim. Julian makes the shot, and Jon releases him. Jon says, “He's a monster. He beats kids twice his size.”

There are three dogs in the house. (“My first ring of defense for an intruder,” Jon explains.) The biggest is Shooter, a 150-pound Presa Canario—a fighting breed banned in parts of the country due to the dogs’ well-deserved reputation for fatally mauling humans. Shooter follows Jon everywhere and growls if I make a sudden movement. “He’s very protective of me,” Jon says. “Don’t ever lift your hands high. Shooter doesn’t like that.”

“What will he do if I raise my hands?”

“Just don’t do it. Trust me on this one, bro.”

There is an awkward moment when Jon walks me into the guest room, where I’ll sleep. The carpet is smeared with a five-foot-long trail of blood, bones, and animal guts. Jon curses. It’s the neighbor’s cat, whom Shooter has eaten and vomited up. “What a shame,” Jon says, delicately scooping pieces of cat into a trash can. “I love cats.”

Shooter has also killed two dogs on the block, a pit bull and a chow. Recently, he chased a Haitian gardener into a tree for whistling at Noemi. At sunset, when Jon and Noemi take Shooter for a walk, neighbors greet them with frozen smiles and retreat behind their doors. “Unfortunately, if a dog challenges Shooter, he will kill him. It’s his nature,” Jon says.

Late at night Jon scrubs the house from top to bottom. Judy says he has always been neat. His prison reports state that as a federal inmate, he “went beyond the call of duty in maintaining the sanitation of his sleeping area and the kitchen.”

As he mops the floor one night, Jon explains the secret of a perfect shine, which he learned in prison. “Fill the bucket with ice, put the wax on when it’s almost frozen. That’s how you get the shine.”

I joke that he cleans the house like it’s a murder scene. Jon tilts his head back and laughs, while keeping his eyes on me. The eyes don’t laugh. Jon is a formidable presence, even in his sixties. Though no taller than five foot ten, he



wears tight shirts that show off a shredded and always deeply tanned physique. A few years ago, after his release from prison, Jon was involved in a petty altercation on the street. Police were called, and Jon found himself in the back of a squad car. With his arms cuffed behind, Jon kicked out the back window and escaped. When the two officers attempted to rearrest him, Jon badly beat one, and several more were called to subdue him with a Taser. “I overreact sometimes,” Jon explains. “But I don’t want to do that anymore, because of my son.”

Jon avoids talking about his past in front of Julian. But the dark side of Jon’s life intrudes. When Jon sends me to the store in his car to buy milk, I reach for sunglasses under the armrest—and a loaded .45 falls out. Later Jon shows me the locations of two guns with silencers, sealed in plastic bags and buried not far from his house on somebody else’s property. He says, “I’m not saying these are my guns, but now you know where they are, in case I ever tell you I need one. You can dig them out with your fingers.”

While Jon keeps some secrets from Julian, he doesn’t hide the positive attention he receives for his gangster past. Hollywood überagent Ari Emanuel calls frequently to discuss Roberts’s deal with Paramount Pictures and Mark Wahlberg, who plans to portray him in a film. During one such call, Noemi says, “See. People come to Jon because he is evil. Mr. Emanuel and the movie star Mark Wahlberg worship the power my husband has. They wish they could have even one pinkie full of the evil that Jon has.”

Julian tells me, “Mark Wahlberg is going stay at our house. My dad’s the cocaine cowboy.” He adds, “Akon<sup>1</sup> wrote a song about my dad.” And Julian sings, ““Stone cold killer with a pocket full of triggers, movin’ that shit by the pound, boy. Better watch out, my dad’s the Cocaine Cowboy.””<sup>2</sup>

Later in the week I enter Jon's home to find Akon himself sitting in front of the TV with Julian playing video games. Jon claims that Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent, and Lil Wayne have all made pilgrimages to visit him. As Julian explains, it's "because my dad's an original gangsta."

Jon and I begin our interviews each morning at eight-thirty, after he drops Julian at school. We sit in the living room by a window overlooking the swimming pool. Jon's recall of names, dialogue, and small details about people is impressive. Due to the notoriety of Jon's family and his own criminal career, there is a vast newspaper archive chronicling key events of his life—his name first appeared in *The New York Times* in connection with a murder shortly after his twenty-first birthday. The format of this book was originally intended to be strictly "as told by Jon," but when some of the stories he told stretched my credulity—from his tales of hanging out with Jimi Hendrix to his detailed account of committing a murder with a man who later became a high-ranking CIA officer—I sought other sources. Their voices are included here and serve to corroborate or at times challenge Jon's version of events.

Jon's language is direct, simple. He generally speaks in what could be called community college-level English, but when recalling past events, he often switches to a syntax of double negatives and *ain'ts* that's closer to the street. Like many people, when Jon tells a story from the past, he often slips into the present tense for the more action-oriented sequences. In writing the book, I occasionally changed the order of the narrative and cut for length, but I didn't invent flowery language or put false observations in Jon's mouth. In some instances, improper grammatical constructions used by Jon are preserved to maintain the authenticity of his voice. It is his story.

In pop culture the rough-edged but almost lovable gangster has almost become a stock figure. Jon does not fit that image. His self-portrait of violent and predatory

behavior is far too frank. His is a story that deconstructs the myth of the honorable gangster and along the way does some serious damage to idealized views of American innocence. Jon thrived as a criminal by being a keen observer of people, and his narrative is filled with cutting portraits of the corrupt politicians, dirty cops, fallen celebrities, rogue CIA agents, and other members of the decadent ruling class who populated his world. His story ultimately stands as an unsettling social history of America, from the 1960s through the 1990s, as told from the perspective of a largely unrepentant criminal.

Jon assures me he has no interest in morality, but his conversations always turn to the moral puzzle of who he is. He begins our interview, saying, “If there is one thing my life has been about, it’s the idea my father taught me when I was a boy: *Evil is stronger than good. If you have any doubt, pick the side of evil.* Those are the morals I lived by. It’s how I got power in different situations. Evil always worked for me. My life is proof that my dad was right. But I hope he’s wrong, too. For my son’s sake. I don’t want to raise my son like my father raised me.”

“I don’t like some of the things my son hears about me from other people. I think it’s strange that we go to Miami Heat games, and when they announce I’m there, everybody applauds, like I’m a hero. If people knew the truth about me, I wonder if they would still be applauding my name.

“When I was born, America was a very straight country. A guy like me wouldn’t have been applauded back then. But I hear the music my son listens to, and it’s all garbage—this gangsta crap—where the singer doesn’t even talk English. This is what people value today, so they probably will still applaud me. I don’t care what they do. The important thing is my son will know the truth about me.”

[1](#) The Grammy-nominated hip-hop performer and producer.

[2](#) The lyrics to the song “Cocaine Cowboys,” written by Akon and performed by Akon and DJ Khaled, do not include the line “Better watch out, my dad’s the Cocaine Cowboy.” Julian added the line after listening to an advance copy of the song Akon gave to Jon.

## 2

**e.w.:** Jon was born June 21, 1948, to Edie and Nat Riccobono. The Riccobono family, which included Jon's sister, Judy, five years older, lived on White Plains Road in the Bronx. Outside their apartment, the IRT train ran past on trestles. Beneath them the Bronx's Little Italy was crowded with Neapolitan bakeries, butcher shops, and olive oil merchants. The Riccobonos' apartment was above Luna Restaurant, a linguini house so quintessentially Sicilian that Francis Ford Coppola used it as the setting in *The Godfather* where Al Pacino marks his entry into the Mafia by murdering two men over dinner.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the residents in Little Italy were law-abiding citizens who wanted nothing to do with the Mafia. The Riccobonos were not in that group. Jon's father and his uncles—his father's brothers, Sam and Joseph—claimed the Mafia equivalent of having come over on the *Mayflower*: They came to New York from Sicily allegedly on the same boat with Charles "Lucky" Luciano, a founding father of Cosa Nostra in America. Jon was born a Mafia blueblood.

Of the three Riccobono brothers, Joseph was the most infamous. Uncle Joe (as Jon calls him) made headlines in 1937 when New York special prosecutor Thomas Dewey indicted him as a member of "Murder Incorporated." Though Murder Incorporated was a mostly Jewish gang headed by Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky, it worked

closely with the Italian Mafia. Joseph served as Lucky Luciano's emissary inside the Yiddish gang. After his indictment, Joseph went into hiding for seven years. When he finally surrendered to authorities, the press noted that he was "one of the most fastidiously attired defendants arraigned in court in some time."<sup>2</sup> Joseph managed to wiggle out of those charges and went on to help engineer Carlo Gambino's bloody takeover of the mob after Luciano was deported by the U.S. government in 1946. He would serve Gambino as his top adviser—*consigliere*—until his death in 1975.<sup>3</sup>

Jon's other uncle, Sam Riccobono, was a capo and a successful businessman. While running a Mafia loan-sharking operation out of Brooklyn, Sam operated a taxi company and built a chain of dental labs that grew into a legitimate business.

Jon's father, Nat, was by all accounts the violent one. He served as one of Luciano's most trusted killers. By the time of Jon's birth, he was enforcing the Italian Mafia's rule over African American businesses. He ran numbers and loan-sharking operations from black bars in New Jersey.

Jon would be influenced by all three men. Like his uncle Joe, Jon developed a taste for flashy attire, an easy rapport with Jewish criminals, and an uncanny ability to slip out of seemingly impossible legal difficulties. He acquired his uncle Sam's sense for business. Like his father, he would be violent.

Jon's mother, Edie, was a blond, blue-eyed knockout whose father was Polish and whose mother was Italian. Her parents had met in New York's garment center, where her father, Poppy Siloss,<sup>4</sup> was a fabric cutter and her mother, Honey,<sup>5</sup> was a seamstress. Though Honey had relatives in the Mafia,<sup>6</sup> she and Poppy lived a hardworking version of the American Dream. They raised Jon's mother in Teaneck, New Jersey, in hopes of shielding her from Honey's Mafia-connected relatives. Their effort failed. When Edie was in

her late teens, she took up with Nat Riccobono and became pregnant with Jon's sister, Judy. Neither Jon nor Judy knows how their parents met.

**JON ROBERTS (J.R.):** My mother had nothing in common with my father. They were Beauty and the Beast. She looked like Marilyn Monroe. My dad was twenty years older. He was stocky, a balding guy. People who saw him on the street walked in the other direction. He barely spoke English. I don't think he had any formal education. He could write numbers and names on a piece of paper, and that was about it.

When I was little, I asked my mother what my dad did, and she got upset. She said, "I don't know. Don't ask me again."

In my house no one talked about the Mafia. I had to put it all together myself. In school I'd hear kids say, "His dad's one of those people." The teachers treated me differently. Nobody questioned me for being absent. Nobody yelled at me when I acted up.

I would find out my father was a "made" man. In movies they show being made as a big, holy ritual. That's the movies. When they made somebody in the Mafia, it was because a guy was bringing them a lot of money. They said a made man couldn't be killed. Not true. If they wanted to kill a made man, they could find a way. Being made mostly built ego in a guy so he'd be a better earner. The Mafia had a game just like any other organization. Burger King has its employee of the month. The Mafia had made men.

My dad's main job was controlling black bars in New Jersey. Out of the bars he loaned money and ran the numbers. The numbers game was started in Harlem way back in the early times, when the blacks were starving up there and needed a way to make money. Then it spread everywhere. Here's how it worked:

The New York *Daily Mirror* printed a circulation number that changed every day. To play the numbers, a person would guess tomorrow's circulation number. He'd write his guess on a scrap of paper, with his initials and his bet—one dollar or five dollars. Every bar had a cigar box where they'd put the bets. My dad drove around to the bars every day, paid the winners, and collected the next day's bets from the cigar boxes.

When I was about five or six, my dad started taking me around with him instead of driving me to school. My dad had a driver, Mr. Tut, who was always with him. Mr. Tut was a black guy who'd boxed in the ring but never made it big because whenever he started to lose, he'd revert to street fighting. He was a giant, with huge fists, and I liked him because unlike my father, he'd smile and seemed like a happy guy.

To my father, black people were "moolies."<sup>2</sup> That's not to say my dad was prejudiced. He didn't like anybody. He didn't even like himself, probably. To have a black driver served a purpose. It was a lot easier walking into a black bar with a black guy than with a white guy because then the blacks didn't get attitude. It helped that Mr. Tut was a tough man.

I don't want to dishonor my father, and I don't judge him, but I don't have fond memories of him. He wasn't a happy-go-lucky guy. He was not nice.

My dad always had a big Mercury or Cadillac. He would ride up front with Mr. Tut and put me in the back. Some mornings they'd drive me to school. Other mornings my dad would take me with him to work. Since my dad didn't talk, I never knew where I was going until I looked out the window.

There was a day in about 1955 when we left early in the morning. We headed toward the bars in New Jersey. I was dozing in the back and felt the car stop. I looked up and saw my dad and Mr. Tut staring ahead.



We were in a half-residential, half-farm area of Jersey. The road led to a one-lane bridge. A car was stopped on the bridge facing ours, blocking the way. Mr. Tut started to open his door, and my dad said, "I'll take care of this."

My dad got out and walked up to the car on the bridge. He always carried a gun. I saw him take it out from his waistband and say something to the man in the car. Then he pushed his gun into the window and shot the man. *Boom, boom, boom.*

Mr. Tut said nothing. We watched as my dad opened the door to the guy's car, pushed the man he'd shot sideways, and got in. He backed the car off the bridge. We drove across it, and my father climbed back in our car.

My father turned to me and asked, "What just happened? Did you see anything?"

I said, "No. I didn't see anything."

I was lucky, I guess, because I made the right response. My father studied my face, the way you'd look at a map. I was studying him, too, like he was the map of my future. I was scared, but I felt close to him like I hadn't ever before. He'd done something that I'd have to keep a secret from everyone. I felt like he was treating me like a man.

I believe the shooting changed me. It made my reactions different from a normal person's. I learned not to get emotional. I learned to observe without reacting or crying. My father trained me in that incident to be like a soldier: not to let what I saw get to me, to move on. I was a little kid. I didn't reason this out. It seeped into me as instinct.

After the shooting I watched the news on TV. I expected to hear a story like "Man gets shot in the head," but there was nothing. I couldn't figure it out. In the movies it was a big deal if someone got shot. The police investigated. There were trials, arrests, headlines. I'd seen a real shooting, and nothing happened.

I became interested in holding a gun, to see what it felt like. We had a big, yellow-wood cabinet in the living room. I

noticed my father put things behind the top ledge of the cabinet when he thought nobody was looking. I climbed up there and found a gun. It was a .38 revolver. I remember holding it, being amazed. When he shot that man in the head, it wasn't a little *pop* like in the movies. It was an explosion. I felt the tiny gun and thought, *This is unbelievable, the force of this.*

By doing a murder in front of me, my dad taught me another lesson. He showed me you can get away with things. It's not like they teach in school. My father did what he did, and he didn't go to jail. It wasn't like God punished my father, made him lose a leg or get cancer. What my father did made no difference to the universe. It showed me that if you're careful not to get caught, you can do anything. It was a very good lesson, maybe the best lesson I ever got. It made all the violence that was to come my way a lot easier.

Around the time of the shooting, my family moved to Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Little Italy. It was a walk-up apartment in an old building. When you came in, you saw we had a lot of nice things. The furniture was new. We had two TVs. We had air-conditioning. It was obvious we were different. All of a sudden mink coats would show up in our house, guys with guns were dropping off expensive food, liquor. I'd go out on the street with my father, and people would move aside.

My parents fought constantly. I never saw my dad hit my mother. But she was afraid of him. I couldn't understand what put them together. What had attracted her to him? She never told me.

My mother and father's beliefs were at the opposite ends of the world. She had compassion for people. He had zero. All they had in common was that they made two children, me and my sister, Judy. She was a good girl. She didn't get into trouble. She liked school. She watched

*American Bandstand*. As different as she was from me, Judy was always loyal. No matter what I did, she never looked down on me.

JUDY: Our mother was artistic. She could draw. She always had flowers in the house. Her parents, Honey and Poppy, were full of life. Poppy was born speaking Polish, but he learned to write poetry in English that he'd recite to Jon and me. Honey was a seamstress for Claire McCardell,<sup>8</sup> and she'd bring me beautiful dresses she made. Our mother drew so much from her own parents. When our father wasn't around, she had a wonderful sense of humor. She loved laughter and music. She taught me to play the piano.

Our mother worked at giving Jon and me a normal childhood. She and Honey used to take me to Philadelphia, where they filmed *American Bandstand*, so I could dance on the show.

Our mother adored Jon. He was obsessed with cowboys and Indians. He watched all the westerns on TV. She got him cowboy outfits, toy guns, and figurines. When Jon was sick in bed, she would sit with him for hours and play cowboys and Indians with his little stupid figurines.

Jon was generous with me. If he got a cookie, he'd share it with me, which is unusual for a boy and his older sister. He was physically rambunctious. He was a daredevil, always jumping off things, running all the time. He jumped off a ledge and split his head open. He came back from the hospital with giant clamps on his head and ran around like crazy. I worried the clamps would get stuck on something and his head would fall open.

Jon loved sports and memorized all the statistics. He had a very good mind for numbers. He was a little wild, but he had a sweet heart. He was a normal boy.

Our home was not normal at all. We had a dual life. Our mother was light. Our father was darkness. When Jon was

in grade school, he changed. He started to act out and scream and bully our mother. She shrank from him. She would not stop him from acting out. I asked her why, and she said, "I can't say anything to your brother. Your father won't let me."

I don't believe my father loved anyone, but he took an interest in Jon. I believe our father was pulling him into his darkness. Jon was so small, and such anger started to come out of him. It would grow and grow.

J.R.: My mother wouldn't tell me to do homework, to pick up my room, nothing. She stopped talking to me. I didn't understand. After I got older, I realized my mother was terribly afraid of my father. I was afraid of him, too. How could I not be? I saw him shoot a man because he blocked his way on a bridge. What normal person would not put the car in reverse and back up? Is it easier to shoot somebody in the head or back up? To my father, it was easier to shoot the guy. I did not ever want to piss this man off. Even when he would say or do something that made no sense, I never would say a word back, nothing.

But our bond was tighter after the shooting. He and Mr. Tut took me on their rounds more and more. I'd barely go to school. In the summer my dad took me to the Jersey Shore. I'd look around at other kids who were there, and they'd be with their mothers, playing little games. I'd be with my dad and his friends—guys with guns, monster bodyguards—all hanging out in the middle of the day playing cards. Nobody had a nine-to-five job.

Many days my father would take me to the racetrack. It was the one thing he did that made him look almost happy. He loved the horses and was an excellent handicapper. I got my love of horses from him. Years later, when I bought my first horse, I thought of my father. It's the one good thing he turned me on to that I thank him for.

My father really liked black music. Obviously, he ran the black bars, and that music is what we heard when we went in them. My father also liked black women. When he'd take me into the bars to collect the cigar boxes with the numbers money, he would tell Mr. Tut, "Watch Jon."

Mr. Tut would sit me at the bar, get me a Coke, and my dad would disappear with a woman. He liked black music and black, black women. Italians don't like to admit this, but in ancient times there was a black migration into Sicily. That's why you see a lot of Italians with very dark complexions. There's African blood mixed in all of us.

Another part of my father's job was looking for people who owed him "vig"—interest on the money he lent. My dad put a lot of money out on the street to blacks and whites. When a guy didn't pay on time, my father would have to chase him down and give him a beating.

It was easy to find people in those days. It was a simpler world. People didn't have the means to pack their bags and take off. If you owed my father money, he and Mr. Tut would drive around until they found you. They'd ask around in the bars. There was always somebody in the bar who would rat out a deadbeat. "The motherfucker that owes you the money is over here."

We'd drive to wherever he was, and my dad would beat the guy. He'd take whatever was in his pockets. If he had a car, he'd take that from him, too.

My dad had big arms and hands, but he didn't believe in using his hands on people. He always hit people with objects. My dad kept a baseball bat in the car. Sometimes he carried brass knuckles. If he had nothing else, he'd beat the guy with the end of his gun. He didn't believe in punching it out with the other guy. My dad was there to give a beating.

Even as a kid, I understood my father's thought train: *The quicker you do a beating, the less problems you're going to have.* If you stand there and punch somebody back

and forth, you don't know how long it's going to last. My father's belief was to hit the guy with something hard and end it as quickly as possible. Make your point physically and move on.

My father was careful not to hit people in the face who owed him money. You hit somebody in the face with a baseball bat, you might kill him, and then you won't collect your money. My dad focused on breaking people's arms, or cracking their shins. I can tell you, when you break someone's bones, they will scream bloody murder. But I never saw my father get excited when he beat people. For him violence was a business tool.

My dad did some things that were a mystery to me. If the guy who owed him money was with a friend, my dad would beat the snot out of the friend, too. My dad would tell him, "This is what you get for being friends with a piece of shit who owes me money."

It made no sense to me. Why beat the one guy if the other one owes you money? But that was my dad's way to make his points to people. If he thought his way was right, then it was right. All my dad's friends and my uncles, they all thought the same way. To them, their way was the right way. There was no question about it.

I'm a person who's used to violence, inflicting it and taking it. I've been shot, had bones broken, and I have been tortured a few times. One time in Mexico dirty cops put jumper cables on my balls and electrocuted me. That was not a good day. But violence and pain don't scare me. They make me angry. They hurt. They force me to concentrate my reasoning and solve the problem of why someone is hurting me.

But you take a normal person, and you break his bones, or you make him watch while you break his friend's bones, or burn his skin with a lighter, he will become very frightened. He will follow the directions you give him. I learned this from the way my father used pain and fear. My