

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Nine Lives

Bill Mason with Lee Gruenfeld

## About the Book

William Mason is arguably America's greatest ever jewel thief. During a thirty-year career he charmed his way into the inner circles of high society and stole over \$35 million worth of fabulous jewels from people such as Armand Hammer, Phyllis Diller (twice), Bob Hope, Margaux Hemingway, Truman Capote, Johnny Weissmuller and even the Mafia.

Along the way he seduced a high-profile Midwest socialite into leaving her prominent industrialist husband, nearly died after being shot in a robbery, tricked both Christie's and Sotheby's into fencing stolen goods for him, was a fugitive for five years and the object of a nationwide manhunt, and yet spent a total of less than three years in prison despite the best efforts of law-enforcement agencies from several states as well as the federal government.

Shadowy, elusive and intensely private, Mason has been the subject of many magazine and newspaper features, but no journalist has ever come close to uncovering the true story. Now, in his own words and with no holds barred, *Nine Lives: Confessions of a Master Jewel Thief* reveals it all, and the real story is more incredible than any of the reporters, detectives or FBI agents who pursued Mason ever imagined.

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# Nine Lives

Confessions of a Master Jewel Thief

Bill Mason  
with Lee Gruenfeld

For those who loved me anyway

## Prologue

PRETTY MUCH ANYBODY who was anybody in southern Florida lived close to the ocean between Miami and Palm Beach, and anytime a lot of well-off people are squeezed into one area, the natural human instinct to compete sets in. When you don't have a job and you don't do anything athletic and you're filthy rich, the way you compete is by trying to convince everybody else that you're richer than they are. South Florida's high-net-worth ladies did this by wearing their money on their bodies in the form of jewelry and then trying to get photographed. Maybe they thought only other high-net-worth ladies read the society pages, but, to a thief, all those photos and stories read like advertising brochures.

I didn't have much of a problem getting dressed up and crashing charity balls and other posh events. I didn't like to do it, because I didn't want my face to become familiar, and it was also tough to explain to my wife why I was heading out on a Saturday evening dressed to the nines and not taking her with me. I did it only when the circumstances called for it, and I usually got into the party by attaching myself to a large group of people on their way in and then acting like I belonged there.

I made it a point to start conversations but then let the other person do all the talking—not much of a trick, believe me—and became fairly adept at spotting who was just trying to impress others and who really had the goods. I also learned where people lived and a good deal about the habits of the idle rich. For example, I learned that if a woman was planning to attend a big bash of some kind, she'd spend the afternoon at the beauty shop, but only after

laying out her clothes and baubles first. That meant an empty apartment with exposed jewelry, and, if there was a safe, an open one. The same people who wouldn't think of leaving a safe unlocked when they were home with it at night thought nothing of leaving it wide open if they were out for the day. One of the perceived cardinal rules of robbery is that you never do it during daylight. But the real rule is just a variation of baseball player Willie Keeler's famous comment on his batting strategy, "Hit 'em where they ain't."

I first became aware of Mrs. Armand Hammer at some high-society ball. I didn't know who she was at first; all I saw was a very beautiful woman wearing some very serious stones. It didn't surprise me to learn that she was the wife of one of the richest men in the country.

Dr. Armand Hammer insisted on being identified as "Dr." even though he'd gotten his medical degree over fifty years before and had never practiced. He was the chairman of Occidental Petroleum, one of the biggest oil companies in the country. He'd bought it when it was near bankruptcy and spent years building it into the giant conglomerate it had become by the mid-seventies. Hammer was a major philanthropist as well, donating massive sums of money and significant works of art to a variety of prestigious institutions. Maybe it was about time he donated a little something to me.

The city directory told me where the Hammers lived, which was in a high-class condo right on the beach in Fort Lauderdale. Their apartment was on the fifteenth floor, which was terrific news for me; they probably assumed they were invulnerable. But the building had doormen, so I'd have to do some careful watching to see how to get into it. Not exactly tough duty. I could sit on a beach lounge chair and watch not just the building but gorgeous women in skimpy bathing suits gliding by.



The building was shaped like a series of staggered square columns, with four apartments to a floor. Each room was set at right angles to the ones on either side of it, effectively making every room a new corner. Two of the apartments faced the ocean to the east, and the other two faced the Intracoastal Waterway on the west side of the building. A narrow ledge, barely noticeable from street level, zigzagged its way completely around the building on every floor, but it looked more like an architectural flourish than a feature of any real use. There was an open stairwell running from the second story all the way to the roof. Anybody in that stairwell would have access to the entire building. Iron bars encircled the second-floor landing, but above that, all the landings were open-air. I guess the working assumption was that no intruder could get above that barred second story, so why spoil the appearance of the building by encasing the whole stairway?

Eventually I'd seen all I was going to see from the ground, so it was time for a little up-close testing. Late one evening I threw a grappling hook up to the second-story ledge between two apartments, climbed up, then rehooked to the third-floor stairway landing above the iron bars. I climbed the stairs another twelve stories and found myself standing right in front of Mrs. Hammer's door. It had a big, bright ADT warning sticker on it and two pretty formidable-looking locks in addition to the standard one just above the doorknob. No way to tell if the place was really alarmed, or if the sticker was only for show, or if they habitually armed the thing. I swear, it was getting harder and harder to make a decent living. Why couldn't they have lived in the unit next door, which had only the standard lock that came with the place originally? This was not looking good.

A shame, too, because I was starting to get a handle on Mrs. Hammer's habits, and I was sure there was a load of treasure inside. I was able to follow her easily as she went in and out of the building. I kept my car about a hundred yards

up A1A, the road that parallels the waterway, and watched for her car from the beach using binoculars. She was a slow driver and it was a simple matter to catch up with her once I'd established her direction. She liked to do her own food shopping, and I once followed her around inside a grocery store just to see what kind of stuff she was wearing. Nothing, as it turned out, which meant all of it was still upstairs in the apartment.

Mr. and Mrs. Hammer would almost always go out for dinner, usually returning by around ten o'clock. I started watching the place at night. Two of the other units were almost always lit up, and I never saw a single time when they were both dark. But the fourth one, the one with the cheap lock, was always dark. I'd already checked and knew it wasn't for sale, so I went back to the city directory and discovered that it was listed as a guest apartment for some corporation. I grappled my way back up the building one night and saw that if I could get into the guest unit, I should be able to get out on that skinny ledge and work my way over to the Hammer place.

The guest unit was on the side of the building opposite the Hammer apartment. The thought of walking all the way across the front of the building (including five right-angle turns to get past all those corners) on an eighteen-inch-wide ledge and with no rope to hold on to was not particularly appealing. Not with a fifteen-story fall as a reward for a slipup.

The challenge of planning a caper is to anticipate as much as possible and prepare accordingly. In addition to things like escape routes and contingencies in case you trip an alarm, you have to decide what kinds of tools you're likely to need and what backup items make the most sense to drag along as well. I had a pretty good feel for what I was likely to be up against in the Hammer apartment, but I was also starting to come to grips with the fact that there was no choice but to navigate that sliver of a ledge and go in

through a window. The door was just too risky. But with my back literally to the wall and the tips of my shoes sticking out over the edge, there wouldn't be any way to carry a whole load of tools with me. And if I ended up tripping an alarm before I even reached the unit, it would be tough enough moving quickly along that ledge without being further encumbered by a lot of weighty gear strapped to my body and not easily undone and dropped.

The answer, when it came to me, was so simple I kicked myself for not having thought of it sooner: I could carry all the tools I wanted up to the guest apartment and stash them there before I went out on the ledge. Once I was inside the Hammer place, all I had to do was go out their door and across the hall to the guest unit, pick up all my stuff and carry it right back.

All I really needed to have with me out on the ledge were some glass-cutting tools. If the Hammer patio door was locked and I suspected it was armed, I could cut a hole in it big enough to crawl through and then disable the alarm system from inside. This was in the days before ultrasonic motion detectors, so once I was in, there'd be nothing further to trip.

Best of all, I wouldn't have to get back out on that hairy ledge to leave once I was done. I could just go down the stairs, same way I got up.

This was looking better and better. It further occurred to me that if I found I was missing a tool, I could simply leave the building altogether—using the stairs and the grappling hook—go get what I needed and come back. Again, no second outing on the ledge.

My escape route in case I somehow tripped a silent alarm in the guest apartment was looking good, too. I'd have such a good view from that ledge I'd be able to see flashing lights from miles away, with plenty of time to get inside and hide in almost any unoccupied unit with a cheap lock. By the time I was ready to do the job, I'd identified three such

apartments and knew how to open the doors on all of them. As long as I didn't have to cut through the glass in the patio door, there would be no trace of my having been in the building at all, and it would be treated as a false alarm. I could then come back after things had settled down and try a different tack.

The ideal time for a job like this would normally have been when the Hammers were planning to go to some fancy do, which I'd be able to know in advance from the society pages. But that would probably be on a Friday or Saturday evening, and the beach area those afternoons would be teeming with people who could spot me easily. If I hit the place when they weren't in the process of getting ready for some event, though, there might not be anything worth stealing. It was certainly possible that they kept the baubles in a safety-deposit box and took out what Mrs. Hammer needed only when she needed it. So one time when I knew they were scheduled to attend a particularly fancy gala, I followed the Mrs. around for two days to see if she went to the bank, and she didn't. That told me they had a safe up there, and I included on my list of tools the stuff I'd need to get into that.

More important, though, all that surveillance and analysis led me to a truly unpleasant conclusion: As if that ledge wouldn't be dangerous enough, I decided that this job needed to get done on a stormy night, when the beach would be deserted and there'd be the sound of thunder and rain to drown out any noise I might make. It also had to be on a night when the Hammers weren't going to be at a posh soirée, because I didn't want to go into that apartment on a night when Mrs. Hammer's best stuff was around her neck instead of in her safe.

Windy, wet and dark . . .

Over the next few days I started looking at the wisp of a ledge in a whole new light.

About two weeks later a perfectly timed storm roared in from the south. It began in the late afternoon of a weekday, and by the time I'd grappled my way up to the stairs, stashed the hook and rope in a fire-extinguisher case and walked up to the fifteenth floor, it was coming down like a monsoon. I got into the guest unit without incident and did a quick look around to make sure I was really alone. I stayed busy and fast and wasted no movement, because I didn't want to dwell on what it would be like out on that ledge. I had planned this down to the tiniest detail, had even thought of carrying a washcloth to wipe the bottoms of my shoes so nobody could tell afterward how I'd gotten in, and so now all that was left was to execute the plan, not give it any more thought. Front door closed but unlocked, bag of tools just inside of it, nothing sticking out of my jacket or pants to impede travel. That was the extent of my mental checklist, so I opened a window and put one leg through it, setting my foot down onto the ledge and sliding it around to test the traction.

It wasn't good. I'd assumed the surface was of rough concrete and would have decent grip, but it was smoother than I'd anticipated and the water from the rainstorm only made it worse. I'd have to make sure to set each foot straight down with every step so as to rely as little as possible on friction to stop my forward motion, which is not the normal way of walking. I got my other leg through and then I was standing up on the outside of the building, still holding on to the bottom of the open window. I leaned back to slide it shut, in order to keep the rain out of the room, leaving a small gap to make sure I could get my fingers in to open it again. Not that it would have locked, but with no real purchase on that tiny ledge, I didn't want to be shoving upward on the glass itself trying to get it open. Finally, I let go completely and stood up again, then started moving.

I'd envisioned the whole trip with my back to the wall, but after about ten feet of futilely wiping rain from my eyes and

imagining my feet sliding out from under me in a heel-to-toe direction, I turned around and hugged the wall instead. I wiggled my feet slightly with each step, feeling for any changes in traction, and the way my shoes were sliding on that slick surface started up a sickening feeling in my belly. I wondered what the police would make of a body squashed on the concrete far below if I slipped. A suicide, perhaps?

It was a truly horrific goddamned trip. I'd already done some high-wire heists, like at the ultra-ritzy Fountainhead, but that was a cakewalk compared to this. That had been a vertical climb, and I'd had a nice comfortable rope to hang on to with both hands, could even wrap my legs around it if I needed a rest, and at worst would have had a forty-foot drop to some sand and a broken leg or two if it all went to shit.

But *this* . . . this was insane. One sneeze and I could be over the edge. I hadn't fully appreciated before this how reassuring it was to have something—anything—to grab on to. All I had here were my hands flat along the wall, and every gust of wind that whipped at my back was like a malevolent force trying to tear me off the building and fling me into the void.

Maybe you were expecting some bullshit about how I stared imminent death in the face and forced it to keep its distance. Well, forget it. I was scared shitless. I was *always* afraid on scores. Not to be would have been lunacy, and this was the most lunatic situation I'd ever launched myself into. On top of all the inherent physical danger was the fact that I was engaged in a criminal activity, so at the same time that I was trying not to die, I was also trying not to be seen. The trick was not to be afraid of being afraid, because fear was a healthy thing in this game, and what you were really after was balance: Be afraid enough to keep you on your toes but not so much that it compromises the execution of the plan. If you're going to let fear get in the way, this is the wrong business to be in.

Stepping onto the Hammer balcony was such a relief, I just sat there and gulped air for a minute, gripping the railing so hard I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to uncurl my fingers from it. When I finally did, I found that the patio door was unlocked and there were no sensors anywhere to be seen. That bit of good fortune should have had a calming effect on me, but my mind was racing nevertheless. This was going almost too smoothly, notwithstanding the nightmare trip along the ledge. I started to wonder if I'd really thought of everything, but I drove that out of my head immediately. It wasn't too likely I was going to think of anything useful while in the thick of things that I hadn't already considered during weeks of careful planning.

I stepped into the apartment and just listened for a while, then did a thorough search to make sure I was absolutely alone. It was dark, but I didn't want to turn on any lights, so I used my penlight. Last stop was the bedroom, and what do you know: There was a large jewelry box right on top of the dresser. The lid was flipped open and the top section was nearly overflowing with fabulous stuff. Santa Claus never had it this good, and he was only after cookies.

This moment, right here, was why I was a jewel thief. It was like a narcotic, being someplace that everyone assumed no one could possibly get into. People spent fortunes, even altered their lifestyles, trying to protect valuables like these from people like me, and here I was, all alone, inches from the treasure. As I liked to do, I'd leave the premises looking exactly like they had before my arrival. To the astonished occupants, it would seem as if the jewels had simply evaporated. This wasn't some mind game I was playing, though, not thumbing my nose or demonstrating any superiority or trying to make a point. It was simply how I avoided getting caught. No changes meant no clues. By keeping my ego in check and my methods obscure, everything the police came up with concerning how I might

have done the job was the purest speculation, and the more they had to guess, the safer I was.

I wasn't going to need any of the tools I'd brought, so there was no sense making a trip next door and back. I grabbed a pillow off the bed, stripped it, then emptied the jewelry box into the pillowcase. At that point I'd been there just five minutes but was already anxious to get the hell out, so I didn't bother looking around for additional goodies. Incredibly, not only was the front-door alarm unarmed, but neither of the additional locks had been engaged. Had there been any way for me to know that in advance, I could have avoided that walk along the ledge.



The Hammer condo was third from the top on the far right, just above the shuttered windows. I got out onto the ledge from the leftmost unit on the same floor.

I went across the hall and got my unused tools from the guest unit, closed the window I'd left partially open and



wiped down the sill. After locking the door behind me, I walked down to the third floor and retrieved the grappling hook from the fire-extinguisher case. The pillowcase full of jewels tucked under my shirt, I lowered myself down to the ground, shook the hook loose, then headed across the street and straight to the water's edge, where I walked two blocks to my car. Once safely away from the building I started going over everything in my mind. Had I left anything at all up there that could be traced? I thought I'd been careful, but I wasn't above second-guessing myself.

I drove to my office and allowed myself a quick look at the loot before stashing it. There were a large number of diamond pieces, mostly bracelets, earrings and pins, and some beautifully worked gold items, including an exquisite gold filigree bracelet. The most outstanding item was a custom-made pin in the shape of a rose. It had diamond-encrusted gold petals that folded open to reveal a three-carat diamond mounted inside. It was absolutely stunning. What a shame it would have to be broken down and sold in pieces so nobody could recognize it and tie me to the heist.

The police never did find out who'd done the robbery, nor did they figure out how the "thieves" (they assumed there was more than one) had gotten in. It was a major embarrassment to everybody concerned: the building's managers, who had assured their tenants of world-class security; the police, who weren't able to figure out how the job was done and had no clues or leads; and the Hammers themselves, who would rather the outside world didn't know they'd left a fortune in jewels lying around their condo and hadn't set the alarms. It seemed to be in everybody's interest to keep the whole incident quiet, so no mention of it appeared in any of the local media.

Four years later, when the police still hadn't identified a single suspect, I would confess to having been the thief.

# Part I

# 1

## Beginnings

MY NAME IS Bill Mason. If that name is not familiar to you, then I've done a good job of keeping things to myself, which was my way of keeping myself out of jail, at least most of the time.

In a "career" spanning nearly three decades I've stolen many millions of dollars' worth of jewelry, gotten shot and almost died, wrecked a good marriage and raised three great kids despite their father's odd (pre)occupation. Although law enforcement authorities were aware of many of my scores, I've never been convicted of stealing jewels.

I've taken rare gems and jewelry from the likes of Robert Goulet, Johnny Weissmuller, Truman Capote and Phyllis Diller (twice), and even cracked a safe belonging to the underboss of a major Mafia family. I've also had some scores that didn't work out, including attempts to rob Marvin Davis, Elizabeth Taylor, Margaux Hemingway and the McGuire Sisters.

I've been chased all over the country by local cops, state cops and the FBI, some of whom I've even developed odd sorts of relationships with. And on the subject of odd friendships, I was the key figure in a major scandal involving a prominent heiress that shocked Cleveland high society.

I didn't have very good reasons to steal; I was by no means poor and my upbringing was perfectly normal, so when you get right down to it, the reason I stole was

because I felt like it. Call it a personality defect—many have thought so, including me—but I didn't really need the money.

This book is by no means a justification of how I chose to live my life. I was a criminal and there is no justification for that unless you're starving or living under a system where the laws themselves are unjust or you're forced to break them for some higher purpose. None of those motives was applicable in my case, and I wasn't some kind of Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor, so you're not going to find any excuses in these pages.

Rather, this book is simply a description of what I did, how I came to do it, how I felt about it and how it affected those close to me. The reason I can tell the story now is that I'm no longer "in the life" and the statute of limitations has run out on the last of my scores.

Everything you'll read is true, with the exception of an occasional hazy date, imperfectly recalled conversation or altered name. In some cases, people who were robbed of precious gems, jewelry or cash are going to learn for the first time who it was that stole them. A good many of my targets, including the Mob, were convinced all along that they were hit by a gang and will be surprised to find out it was just me, acting alone.

I don't expect any more forgiveness from friends and family for the pain I caused them; what I've already received from them is well beyond what I had any right to expect. I just want them to understand a bit more than I was ever willing—or able—to explain while the events in this book were taking place. This is their story as much as mine.

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I think the most extraordinary thing about my life is how ordinary it was—at least if you don't count my little hobby of stealing jewels.

When I decided to write this book, I thought one of the more interesting aspects of the effort would be to reflect on my childhood days and try to identify those experiences that pushed me in such a questionable direction. I'd read some biographies of unusual people and there always seemed to be large forces prodding them inexorably toward their destiny. The way those books were written, you'd think it was impossible for them to have turned out any other way than they did.

But biographers, and that includes autobiographers, tend to focus on those things that support the impressions they're trying to establish. The way they write makes it seem that absolutely nothing else was going on in their subjects' lives other than the handful of specific events and experiences that turned them into musicians or politicians or scientists.

Fact is, children are bombarded with all kinds of influences, and it's nearly impossible to tell which ones had which effect. Just because it makes a good story doesn't make it true. My guess is that Newton would have figured out gravity whether that apple had hit him on the head or not, if it ever really hit him in the first place.

I think what's actually going on is that childhood is like an allergy test for talent. If you've ever been tested for allergies, you know that the doctor rubs your skin with hundreds of different substances until one of them raises a welt. In the same way, a kid comes across hundreds of opportunities to uncover some latent talent until one of them hits, and then his course in life starts to take on some direction. Sometimes it's obvious, like when a seventh-grader is six feet tall and can dribble a basketball blindfolded with either hand, or a grade-schooler builds a radio out of old washing-machine parts.

Sometimes it's not so obvious, as in my case. I could climb trees like a monkey and take apart all kinds of machines and put them back together; there was little that

frightened me and I could keep my mouth shut while listening. But so what? How did those things add up to a career?

It wasn't until I went out and tried to steal something that I realized what my odd collection of skills might be good for.



As I said, nearly everything about my life was ordinary, including my early childhood.

I was born in 1940 in a small West Virginia burg called Hundred. It was in Monongalia County, which was known as the mother county of northern West Virginia because eighteen other counties, some in Pennsylvania, had been carved out of it since its creation in 1776. Hundred was about three miles and fifty years from the Pennsylvania border, rural and mostly dirt-poor.

Many of my earliest memories were wrapped around the things people generally did in those years to support the war effort and not go broke. It was a time of great thrift, and, like other families, we saved everything: foil from cigarette packs, cooking fat, string, paper . . . anything that might conceivably be turned to a further purpose rather than discarded. We didn't know at the time to give it a fancy name like "recycling."

There were nightly blackouts, even in the heartland, where the likelihood of an attack was pretty remote, unlike in the coastal communities 350 miles to the east. I can still easily summon up the fear I felt as a four-year-old—depending on the darkness to keep us safe, hoping that the Germans couldn't see our small town and drop a bomb on us.

It's an easy leap, I suppose, to the conclusion that my strong need for financial security and the comfort I feel in darkness were shaped at that time, but thousands of kids scrimped pennies and sought refuge from the enemy behind

blackout curtains without turning into criminals, so who knows?

Don't get me wrong, though, because aside from the occasional stresses of wartime, it was a great time and place to be a kid. I was the adored only child of educated parents. I had acres of open land on which to roam and explore, farm animals to play with and the kind of delicious freedom available only to children in wide-open rural areas.

Best of all were the trees. As far as I was concerned, they were put on earth for me to climb, and I was good at it. By the time I was five, I was able to climb without using my legs, just my arms. When horizontal branches were too high to reach from the ground, I was often able to shinny right up the trunk, like a koala bear.

Things changed when I was six. Both my parents were teachers—Ella, my mother, taught third grade in the local elementary school, and Ora, my father, was a gym teacher and coach at Waynesboro High School in Pennsylvania—but the region was in dire straits. Monongalia County, an apparent spelling error on early documents, was named after the Monongahela River. It meant “river of crumbling banks,” and that pretty much described what was happening to the local economy. My father found a better-paying job but had to go to Detroit for it. He was gone for long stretches at first, but that became too much, and he eventually decided to move us all to Detroit, where we lived with my aunt Nell. She had two children, and they became like my brother and sister. Still, I missed West Virginia and kept alive the hope that we'd move back there someday.

But about two years after that move my father was offered another job, and as much as he didn't want to relocate us again, this was too good to turn down. My uncle, who owned two apartment buildings in Cleveland, hired Dad to manage them, and we moved to Shaker Heights. Taking up residence in that more affluent neighborhood was quite an occasion for my parents but devastating to me.

Shaker Heights had high-rise apartment buildings, paved streets and sidewalks, and hand-planted trees with wire fences around them to keep kids off. It had neighbors who were ten feet away instead of a ten-minute walk, and many of them were the well-off kind who liked children polite and quiet and clean. One quick glance around the concrete-and-asphalt prison of Shaker Square Apartments and I knew that my days of running in fields, milking cows and climbing trees were behind me for good. I doubt either of my parents truly understood how miserable that move made me. I was lonely and despondent, and used to daydream about running away from home and going back to West Virginia. Eight years old and convinced my life was already ruined.

I hated apartment buildings from the very moment I first laid eyes on one. If adults chose to live in oversized chicken coops, that was their business, but what's the point of condemning a kid, and a country-raised one at that, to that kind of stifling confinement? Nevertheless, kids adapt; stuck for anything else to do, I started climbing buildings instead of trees. I discovered roofs and basements and they became my playgrounds. As a result I became friendly with a lot of maintenance men and building superintendents, and thereby got a first-class education in matters that Boulevard Elementary School didn't seem to feel were important.

People who take care of apartment buildings are under-appreciated masters of many arts. They do the work of electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masons, painters, locksmiths, glaziers and machinists, often all in the same day. Something I noticed early on was that their orientation was 100 percent practical; they weren't interested in the purity of craft, they just needed to get stuff working, and quickly, in order to avoid bringing down the wrath of demanding tenants.

Imagine having all those skills and nobody to show them off to. Then imagine that a curious kid shows up; he's interested in everything and he doesn't start yawning every



time you try to share your wisdom. He's good with his hands, too, and helps out whenever he can.

I learned a lot from those guys, not because I had any life plan or was consciously preparing for anything, but just because I found it interesting and fun. Always handy with things mechanical, I badgered maintenance men into letting me try to fix washing machines and refrigerators that they'd given up on as hopeless or not worth the effort. There was little downside if I couldn't fix them, as they were slated for the junk heap anyway, but after I managed to get some things working again, I was allowed to tackle tougher jobs. A couple of guys also began taking time to teach me a few things.

Locks were particularly fascinating. Precision mechanisms full of tiny springs and bits of metal machined to close tolerances, they got slammed and banged around all day yet hardly ever failed. About the only reason to take them apart was to change over to a new key, or if someone broke a key while fumbling to get a door open when he was drunk or in a hurry and left a piece inside the mechanism. When that happened, the quickest fix was to just replace the lock, but a couple of the handier maintenance men were able to dismantle the mechanism right down to individual components, put it all back together and avoid the cost of a new lock. I watched them do that for hours on end, began helping out and gradually got to the point where I could do it by myself. There's no better way to learn how something mechanical works than by taking it completely apart.

I was more comfortable around working adults than I was with my fellow elementary school students. Around kids and teachers I was very quiet, less interested in the kinds of questions they wanted me to ask than in those I really wanted answers to. The practical aspects of how things worked in the real world were of more immediate concern than whether you used "I" or "me" in a sentence. I remained a kind of introvert through high school, which

somehow must have increased interest in me among the female student body. I wasn't aggressive about pursuing girls but was never short of dates.

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As I got older, I began helping my father in the buildings he managed. I enjoyed the work, but the best part was that I got to read all the magazines the tenants discarded. *The New Yorker* and *The Saturday Evening Post* were among my favorites. I managed to earn some change running errands for tenants, and when I was old enough, I got a newspaper route. Here was one great advantage of apartments over widely spaced houses: I could deliver nearly five hundred papers on a Sunday morning, and the money I earned looked like a small fortune to me.

Once I got into the upper grades, I started enjoying school more, too. I played a lot of football and was on a championship dodgeball team, and I even liked some classes, especially science and history. And even though I was getting up at five every morning to deliver papers, I still had enough stamina to go to a lot of parties and after-school events.

I got along well with my father and felt a little bad for him at the same time because I thought he was getting the short end of the stick from my mother's family. That was on account of Uncle Rudy, my mother's brother, better known as Dr. Richard Renner. My mother's family had struggled through some very difficult times to put him through medical school, and after he'd become a doctor, he became the family's pride and joy. He founded a prestigious hospital in Cleveland and was one of the city's more visible and esteemed VIPs. Next to Uncle Rudy, it was impossible for Dad to measure up, and although he kept well hidden any resentment he might have felt, I had trouble doing the same. It wasn't until much later in my life that it occurred to me to wonder whether my father's constant struggle with

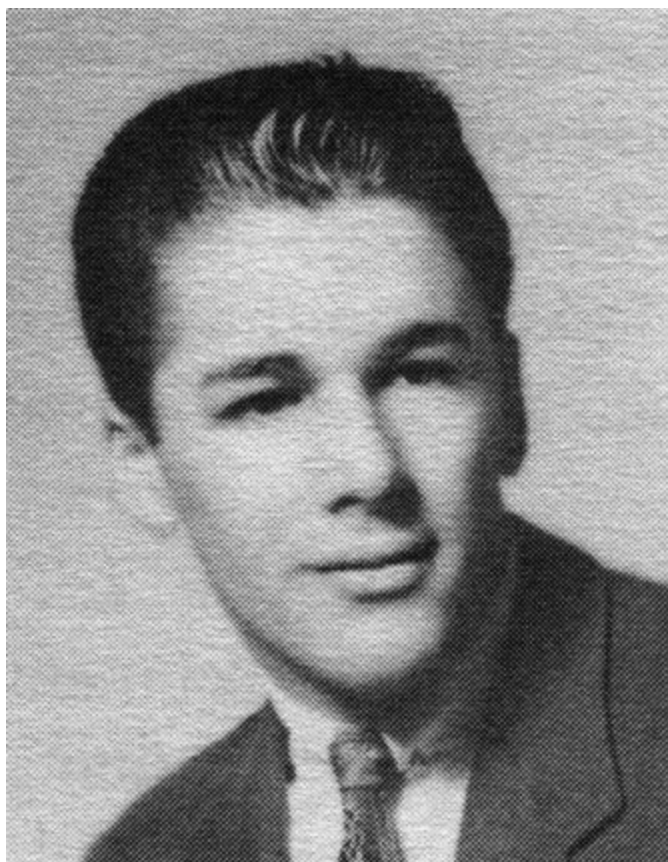
severe ulcers might have had something to do with the stress of living in Uncle Rudy's shadow.

Dad and I saw each other a good deal because we were working together, and we also went to a lot of ball games. Which is not to say we were a pair of good old buddies on an equal level. He kept a pretty firm grip on me, and he didn't kid around. One wild weekend I got a tattoo of a snake on my right arm, and managed to keep it hidden from him for nearly a year. When he found out about it, he threw a serious fit. You know the conventional wisdom that says you can't remove a tattoo? Bullshit, even in the days before lasers. Dad dragged me to a doctor on 105th Street who froze my arm with dry ice and then took a high-speed rotating wire brush to my skin. That night as I was hurting and bleeding, all I could think about was that I'd have to go through it again after the first treatment healed. It ended up taking three scrapings altogether, removing every trace of not only that tattoo but also any desire I might ever have to get one again. I had to pay the doctor out of my own pocket, too. I generally behaved myself because of Dad and didn't start fucking up in earnest until high school.

One thing that was new in high school was that differences in social status began to take on increasing importance. Most of the kids in the lower grades weren't really aware of the family backgrounds of other students and tended to form groups based on shared interests like sports. But as we got older, we became more aware of who came from what kind of background. We were a mixed lot, and once those differences began to surface, there was a clear realignment of friendships.

Shaker Heights is on land originally owned by the Shaker sect and sold to a pair of land developers in 1905. Their idea was to create one of the first "garden city" suburbs in the United States, and part of the plan for attracting a high caliber of resident was to emphasize superior education. Shaker Heights High was one of the top schools in the

country, and about 90 percent of its students were the children of wealthy parents, some of them old money and some genuine rags-to-riches American success stories. Those students dressed in expensive clothes, traveled a good deal and got exposed to a lot of culture.



Like Beverly Hills High, though, Shaker Heights High was public and had to accept anyone within its designated geographical boundary. The other 10 percent of the student body, of which I was a part, were from the other side of the tracks—some literally—but entitled to attend by virtue of their addresses inside the school district. Tough guys who wore leather jackets and Elvis Presley haircuts, we were called “rackies” for reasons that now escape me. There was no celebration of diversity, no multicultural festivals of mutual understanding, nothing like that. The more these two groups kept to themselves, the more the differences

between them seemed to grow. There was no way my side could keep up with the swells in terms of cars, clothes and other material things, so our choice was either to withdraw and feel inferior or to strut what we had and try to be proud of it. All we had, though, was attitude, and we made sure there was plenty of it. I was among the more belligerent of the rackies, forever getting into fights and other trouble, proud of my bad-boy image the same way the rich kids were proud of their snooty upper-class airs.

My particular situation was compounded by the fact that most of my teachers liked me. The dreaded phrase—"He's not living up to his potential"—attached itself to me like a persistent rash. If they'd thought I was beyond hope, I could have sailed through high school unmolested, but it seemed that every other week some goody-ass teacher was calling up my parents to complain about how I wasn't living up to my potential, how I was wasting my time and talent getting into scrapes, cutting classes and Lord only knew what else. My parents' reaction was to get mad and ground me, which only increased my resentment of those meddling teachers even more, making me surlier and even harder to deal with.

Paradoxically, although I was clearly identified with the rackies, I had a lot of friends among other groups of students, including the wealthier kids and those in the grades above me. People today recall me as having gotten along pretty well with everybody, and that's my memory, too, even though I got into fights on a fairly regular basis. I played on the school football team, so maybe that was some kind of a sign that I wasn't a total outsider.

Getting into trouble in that unenlightened era was a self-perpetuating situation. Administrators who meted out punishment didn't do so with uplifting thoughts of straightening us out and being helpful: They were just pissed off, didn't know us very well and had already decided we were incorrigible and not worth their effort. They seemed to enjoy making our lives miserable, more in the way of

retribution than rehabilitation, or so it seemed to us. This, of course, only made us angrier and more determined to cause trouble, and so around and around it went. We couldn't wait to get out of school, and they couldn't wait to get rid of us. The only thing that came between me and expulsion was the strong presence of my father. With him in my life there was a line I wasn't willing to cross.

Through it all, though, I managed to get halfway decent grades without ever really trying. Maybe that's why my teachers thought I was worth saving. I graduated in the spring of 1958 and was entitled to attend Ohio University. I don't think anybody in that high school ever seriously considered that I'd actually go to college, least of all me, but by that time I had a pretty strong incentive. Not to go to just any college, but to Ohio in particular.

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One afternoon when I was in the tenth grade, I was pitching quarters against a wall with a few friends. One of them was Bobby Luria, a smallish kid with a slight lisp. I don't remember how it came about, but it seemed I'd become his protector. (He's a lawyer now and we're still friends.)

Bobby pitched a "leaner," a quarter that stood up against the wall and was an automatic winner. He jumped forward to collect his winnings, but just as he reached down, a hand came around the corner and scooped up the money.

"Hey!" Bobby yelled as he drew back in surprise.

It took me a second to realize what had happened. I ran around the corner and saw some guy running away, the back of his open leather jacket flapping noisily. I took off after him, closing a lot of ground before he figured out someone was after him. By the time he kicked up to a higher gear, my momentum had carried me right to him. I grabbed a loose fold of his jacket, spun him around and pressed him up against the wall of the building.