

NOT WORKING

The interview seemed to be over. I was about to turn off the tape recorder. He said he had one more thing to add. As he spoke his voice dropped almost to a whisper.

Since you say you're gonna change the names and everything, I'm gonna tell you another experience that happened to us during the time I was unemployed and had no money. My wife got pregnant. She had to have an abortion because we didn't have no money. I think that really hurt me. But there wasn't no other way. That was the last choice we had. That's something I left out, but after you and me talked, I just wanted to show you. You thought it was bad, but I told you something worses than that. I figured, "Ain't no use to let the baby come and have to starve." She really felt upset about it, you know. She cried. My wife would call me up on the phone and cry. But I didn't see no other way around. It's a hurting feeling. It gets you down when you start thinking about it. You think of what the baby could have been. But then again, I didn't want it to starve either. I know if that had happened, I would've really did something illegal. I couldn't stand for it to go starve. So that's the story.

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MINORITY YOUTH: "Natchez Is Natchez All Over the World"

In every American city, large or small, a high percentage of young people from minority groups cannot find work—or work only sporadically—for years after leaving school. The current rate of unemployment among minority teenagers approaches an astronomical 40 percent. The reasons for this employment blight are obvious, including lack of vocational skills, lack of advanced education, the flight of industry from central cities, and racial prejudice. The remedies are not so obvious, and some proposals, such as reducing the minimum wage or outlawing the widespread demand for a high school diploma as a certificate of employability, are highly controversial. Government job programs like the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) are useful but far too small. As a 1977 report by the Vocational Foundation, Inc., of New York notes: "For minority youth, these are the years of a great depression, far worse in its impact on them than any depression that the country as a whole has ever encountered."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the young people in this chapter, then, is that they still cherish high hopes for the future.

JIMMY GREEN

A wooden shack in the black section of Natchez, Mississippi. Two tiny rooms: a kitchen/living room and a space barely big enough for a bed and crib. The roof leaks; windowpanes are cracked. In the front "yard" of red dirt are a car up on blocks, a pickup truck, and auto parts scattered about. He lives with his wife, Letty, and two kids: a son, three, and a daughter, one. "Sometimes we get angry and maybe holler or something. It's just the idea of us stayin' here. She's tired of us livin' here. I'm tired of it, too, but there's nothin' we can do at the moment. So maybe the reason we holler is because of the way we're livin'."

He is a Vietnam veteran with an undesirable discharge, the result of a "little riot." He has a high school diploma but is unskilled. "I took this correspondence course from a commercial trade school. It was studying to be an electrician. Due to money problems I wasn't able to finish. I've still got everything they sent me, but I owe them \$400 and some. They can't get the money if I can't pay it, unless they can get it out of my hide."

Letty listens silently, as though letting the man of the family speak for them both. During the day she studies secretarial skills at a business school, leaving him to watch the children.



For a year after I got out of the service I mostly sat and didn't do nothin'. I was at home, see. Didn't have to work. It was like rest and recuperation. Take a year and relax. Then I met Letty, and after that we got married. By then I had a job. I left that one to seek for a better one. I had a bunch of jobs over two years. It wasn't that I would leave them just to be leavin'. I always left with intentions to seek a better one, but it didn't work out that way. I did a little of everything. I worked a week or two, sometimes only a day or two on some of 'em. Some I blew because we didn't get along, or the pay wasn't right, or I wasn't really satisfied. Some little thing that I didn't like or my boss didn't like. I've probably been at the unemployment office more than anybody in Natchez. Always lookin' for another job.

I can't say that I'm the easiest person to get along with. I can understand most anybody. They can talk to me, and I'll understand. So I'm not really hard to get along with. . . . I mean I'm not crazy. But whatever you're gonna do to me, I'm gonna do to you. I don't care who you are. And I'm always thinkin' big, thinkin' ahead. I want a whole lot for my family, and so far I'm just not gettin' it. So I ask myself, "Why work eight hours a day for a \$2 job when I could be workin' eight hours a day

for a \$3.50 job or even a \$4 job?" Even if I'm workin' for, say, \$4 an hour, I say, "If I can get a job at \$4, I might get one at \$6." That's the way I feel. Just continue and continue thinkin' big. I guess you might say there may not never be no end to what I think. I might get a job for \$100 an hour, and maybe I'd be thinkin' about \$1,000 [laughs]. That's just the way I am, man. It's not that I'm greedy. I just want the best for my family since I got one. If I was by myself I wouldn't care. I'd be sittin' at home right now and it wouldn't worry me. But since I have a family, that's the problem. And I figure I never could be earnin' enough to do what I want, even if I was makin' \$100,000 a year. Only time I'd be makin' enough is if I was like all the rich people, sittin' at home and orderin' people around. And I always say, if I don't have it made by forty-five, I'm just gonna quit anyway.

What do you mean, "quit"?

Just sit home. Grow old, I guess. It don't make no sense for a man or a woman to work all their lives. Like my mom and dad. They're old and crippled, and they're still workin'. I don't want to be fifty and sixty years old and still tryin' to go out there and make a dollar. If I'm gonna be poor, I might as well be proud poor. That's better than being sorry poor. At least I can be proud. They'll say, "Well, he died poor, but he died proud." That's the way it's gonna be. I mean, who wants an old person like that at work anyway? When you get past that age and you go out there tryin' to get some job, that's a strike against you. 'Cause even if they hire you, they probably goin' to pay you less than a young man is gonna make. Nobody wants you when you get old, and I don't want to go out there and embarrass myself lookin' for no job at that age.

What was the last job you had?

Well, the longest one I had, and the last one, was at this gas station. I stayed there for about six months. Makin' about \$150 a week. That was about the best one I had, too. Then me and the man got into an argument and he let me go. I went to file for unemployment and they wouldn't give it to me because they said I was fired due to the loss of customers. The man said he was losin' customers because of me.

Was that true?

No. All I did was speak my mind. I don't care who you are or what you are or what you're doin', I feel that I should speak my mind as well as you can speak yours. Even if that means you won't be comin' to my service station for something. I mean, if someone has somethin' wrong

with their car and they ask me what would be the best place to get it fixed, why should I tell them to fix it here when I know I can't do it or he can't do it? You can maybe get it repaired better somewhere else. Well, this maybe tends to lose the man customers, so I guess to him that's wrong. I should try to bring people in instead of send 'em away. But I figure, why pull the person's leg when you know you can't do nothin' for 'em?

Like a couple of people asked me if I tuned cars. I told 'em, yeah, I could tune cars, but I couldn't tune 'em there. I could tune 'em up at my house or maybe at their place. Well, the man thought I shouldn't be talkin' like that on the job, tryin' to get customers for myself. People figure that you work for them, so your mind and soul and body should just be thinkin' of them and that work. You can't take a moment to think about yourself or somethin' else. As long as you're on their time, you got to do what they say and think as they say. That's just not me. If a person asks me for advice, I'm gonna tend to give it to him. Girl, boy, black, white, green, makes no difference. I guess they wasn't ready for that.

Then I made a careless mistake. I had to put a fuel filter on a car. I put it on there, but I should've cranked it up to see if it worked. I didn't crank it up. I went home and another guy cranked it up. I guess he was under the impression that I had checked it, and he took it out of the bay, and it blew up. It caught on fire and all the wires in the motor burnt. I naturally had to pay for it. And I could understand the man bein' angry. I told him, "Well, it's my negligence and I'm sorry. I'll pay for the damage." Then he sent me somewhere to get a trailer and a hand truck. I got the trailer but I forgot the hand truck. That's when I blew it. He started callin' me names, you know, "stupid" and stuff like that. And everybody can take only so much. It got to the point where I couldn't take any more, so me and him got into it and I told him what he could do with his job. He paid me off and I left.

I was plannin' on quittin' anyway. I knew it was gonna come to that, but I thought maybe I could last another month or so. See, he was screwin' me on my paycheck. I was workin' from sunup to sundown, six days a week. I was goin' in from seven in the morning to six in the evening. It was a sixty-hour week. And he was payin' me \$2.50 an hour, all straight time. I never got no overtime. So I knew he was screwin' me, and he knew he was screwin' me. And there was another thing. He tried not to show it, but I knew he was prejudiced. I was poor black and that still drew a big line between us. In other words, it makes no difference that he left the key with me and let me run the cash register. That was as far as I was gonna go. He never thought about maybe a raise or maybe even so far as my bein' a partner after so many years. You know how things like that go. I knew I wasn't goin' nowhere.

So after he fired me, I went to the unemployment office. They took my

claim. Well, I always say you can tell when somebody is leadin' up to somethin', and this was one of them times. I went there week after week. From the first to the third week I didn't worry about it too much because it always takes that long. They told me to keep goin' every week, so I kept goin'. Usually about the third week they'll tell you how much you're drawin'. But they didn't tell me and I didn't ask. They said they were havin' trouble hearin' from Jackson. By the sixth week I was gonna make it my business to find out what was goin' on. But by the time I wanted to make it my business, they already had it waitin' for me. They had a paper sayin' I was disqualified due to some article, Section Twelve. Misconduct. They had verified statements from the gas station that due to my conduct or behavior, the station was losin' customers. So I was disqualified from August through October. On October 11 I can file again, but that won't assure me that I'll get it. If they figure I still shouldn't have any, I'm disqualified again.

I couldn't believe it when this happened. I had never heard of nobody getting turned down for unemployment. This was the first. When I got the disqualification paper, I said, "Hey, this can't be me." I mean, why disqualify me? I thought this never happened to nobody. It really came as a big shock 'cause it meant that until I found a job, I wouldn't have no money comin' in at all. I couldn't believe my eyes. I looked at the paper three and four times: "Disqualified." How did they know? I figure it was just my word against his, so what made me really mad was the idea that they're gonna sit up there in Jackson and rule on what I should have and what I shouldn't have. How do they know what was goin' on down here? In general they took his word that I lost his customers. I guess the board figured he had a more better statement than I did. He had a better reason to say I shouldn't get it than I had a reason to say I should.

Of course, they said I had a right to appeal. But what's the use of appealin' something? You're gonna get the same answer. It's a funny thing about the right of appeal. It's only a nice way of sayin' they're not gonna discriminate against you, because they say, "You have a right to say this is unfair. So we give you a piece of paper, and if you feel it's unfair, you write down that it's unfair." Then all they do is say no again, and they'll tell you they gave you a chance. So what's the use of sendin' 'em an appeal if the same answer is gonna come? That's only wastin' their time and my time as well. So I didn't worry about it.

But I still feel it's altogether wrong. They favor the employer over the employee, which I feel should be the reverse. Because I got a family and he's single. He's the owner of the place and I'm unemployed. And it's not gonna hurt the state to give me that \$43 or \$45 or whatever it is once a week, to try and support my family. I guess it's sort of punishment, so that the next job I get I'll cool my temper or something. I know I ain't no high-tempered person. But if I was to appeal my case and say, "I'm not this, I'm not that," it ain't no good. I wouldn't have got nobody to come

here first hand and talk to me. All I woulda had was papers. They would've sent me papers and I would have to send 'em back papers. All paperwork. And when you're correspondin' on paper, you don't get no feelin' you're talkin' to a person. You got to see 'em and look at 'em and their reactions, and they look at you and get a feeling of how that person is.

This all happened about two months ago. Man, it came as a blow. 'Cause you wonder what you're gonna do next, with no money comin' in. How are you gonna get money? It's been a rough two months survivin' without any money, period. I managed to get along by fixin' this, cuttin' that, washin' this. . . . Somethin' to get me a few dollars every now and then to keep goin'. But every day it's gettin' thinner and thinner. If I don't come up with some money soon, it's gonna thin out completely [laughs].

Have you been looking for a new job?

Yeah, but not too hard. I got to the unemployment office and they give me cards for different places, but either they want experienced people or there's a hundred people applyin' for the job. Like a couple of weeks ago they sent me to a plantation. I've never been no farmhand. I've never been on a farm. So if I give the man a line, like "Yeah, I know everything about farming," he's just gonna end up firin' me 'cause I don't know. It's only makin' a fool of myself. This afternoon I applied for an oilfield job, which I have a little experience in, but the man said to call him back. Most of the time you might as well not even bother to put in an application 'cause they're not gonna look at it. If you're lucky, they might store it. That's if you're lucky. They had a new place open up around here, a grocery store. Letty and me was gonna go put in an application, but during the first day of takin' applications there was seven hundred people there in the store. What's one or two more gonna do? You can imagine how many people in Natchez and the surrounding area that's out of a job. They swarm into Natchez from all the little towns 'cause Natchez is about the biggest place around here.

I used to go around to all the plants, Armstrong and Wilco and International Paper and what have you. But IP was the only one where I passed the test, and they wouldn't let me in because of my discharge. I passed all their tests; but they started talkin' about military discharge, and that's where it stopped. That's the killer in most of these factory jobs. That's the reason why I don't say nothin' about bein' in the service when I go for a job now. If they ask I tell 'em, "No, what's the service?" 'Cause I know if I mention it, they're gonna bring up what kind of discharge I have. That's ruined me so much in the past that I don't mention it no more.

Mostly I just sit home. I reckon if it's gonna come, it's gonna come. I

live day by day. I think about not havin' work, but I don't get into a panic. I know I'm bad off. My wife knows we're bad off. And the Man up there knows we're bad off. So if He wants to change it, He'll say, "Well, I'm gonna give this man here some money, or I'll give him a job. Get him together." I just keep on hopin' to find somewhere I can get work. Most of the jobs I've had I didn't really look for. The unemployment office came through many times, and I'm lookin' for them to come through again. And I look in the paper for ads.

You might say our financial situation is very dim [laughs]. We might have a nickel between us, and I'm gonna keep that for tomorrow. So I got nothin' to spare tonight, man [laughs]. A lot of people ask me how we live with no money comin' in. Well, we ain't got too many bills pilin' on. We might have a \$12 gas and light bill. Then we got the phone bill, and the rent, which is \$25 a month. Which ain't bad, but it ain't good either. So the majority of times our bills come to about \$50 a month, and I can usually raise that money. Sometimes we get a week or so behind. But nothing has been taken away from us 'cause there ain't nothin' to take. Everything here—well, it's ragged, but it's ours. The car's ours; the furniture's ours. We just have to worry about light and phone and rent bills.

But we've been cuttin' back. Oh, yes. You'd be surprised how much you can cut back when you ain't got nothin' to cut back with [laughs]. It's like that commercial on TV where the man says, "You have three meals a day. Why don't you cut back and give one to CARE?" Well, we cut back, too, and it ain't to CARE neither. We have to economize. Actually it's more than economizin'. We're on rock bottom. At first we had some money saved up and some food stocked up, but you get down to a point that it's a day-by-day thing. You gotta find some money to get somethin' to eat for the day or think about ways to get money to buy somethin' for tomorrow. We don't go to movies no more. We don't play the TV all the time. We used to put on the air conditioner when it's hot, but now we put on the fan instead. We just put one light on in the house, so we can barely see. I know it's not gonna help much, but in the long run it's gonna help some. And if we don't have enough food for the next day, we cut down on the meal and save some. What you call stretchin' a meal.

I don't know how, but somehow we manage it. I do little various things that I can do. Handiwork stuff. Fix this or that for my mother, Letty's mother, other people. I get a couple of dollars out of it. Sometimes we have to borrow a little money. But somehow we get by.

You seem in amazingly good spirits.

Well, why be down about it? I can't do nothin' about the way I'm livin'. I'm hopin' to get a job, and that's it. Both Letty and me know what

the situation is. And what's bein' mad gonna get you? That don't get you nowhere, bein' mad. I mean, just 'cause you're angry at bein' unemployed, that ain't gonna make nobody jump up and give you a job. You get better treatment if you're pleasant and smilin' than if you go in with a frown on your face and say, "I want a job." I always go in with a smile on my face and hopin' to get a job. If people meet you with a smile, why can't you meet them with a smile, even though you're hurtin' inside? Might as well smile. Might turn out to be your lucky day. Like I say, I know what the situation is. Letty knows what it is. I know the fault's on me 'cause anytime I lose a job or quit a job, I know it's my fault. And my family suffers for the mistake I made. But there's no point cryin' about it. Maybe it depresses us sometimes, and we get angry and holler 'cause of the way we're livin'. But you calm down and come back to normal. The kids are still eatin'. They don't go indecent or unclean. They still eat. We haven't gotten to the point where if I eat, they don't eat, or if they eat, I don't. So I just go on with a smile.

Have you thought about leaving Natchez?

I've thought about that many times, but where would I go? Natchez is Natchez all over the world. The other places are only bigger than Natchez. If I knew a specific place that was hirin' for a specific thing, I might go. But just to pull up roots and say, "I'm goin' to Minnesota," and try to get a job there, it's farfetched. Or people in my family might say, "Come on up here, you can find a job here." I ain't gonna go there when all I have is their say-so. How do they know I can get a job? That's as farfetched as pickin' a city out of nowhere. You may be livin' with them, but they're gonna get tired of that. If you don't find a job in a month's time, they're gonna be ready for you to pack up and come on back.

If I saw on TV or written in the paper that they have a specific job in a specific place that I may be qualified for, I would go and apply for it. But like these days everyone says they're hiring in Houston, Texas. Well, whereabouts exactly are they hirin'? This is just hearsay. I don't want to go to Houston, Texas, just because somebody said they're hirin'. I want to know for sure.

Do you ever think about getting together with everyone else who's unemployed in Natchez and marching on Washington or City Hall?

No. Never think about that [laughs]. Because it's so very hard. I mean, it takes money to march on Washington. And then the people in the White House, or wherever you're gonna march to, they sit up there in their cool offices and don't even hear you. And if they do, who's to say they're gonna come out and meet your demands? There've been so

many marches on so many things, like civil rights, where people got together and went different places. Only about one in five was heard. I know there's a hope that you'll get heard better than as individuals, but it takes a long time. Look at all the time the civil rights movement took. And I guess poor people are even worse off than minorities 'cause they're unemployed and probably don't have no money to take a walk or a plane to Washington. They're probably under stress, bein' unemployed, and maybe they're too busy lookin' for a job to protest about one they lost.

So I'm not one to protest or buck the system. I did in the service, but I had good reasons. I mean, I have good reasons now. I realize that. If it really came down to a few of us gettin' together and goin' over to the mayor's office to protest about bein' unemployed, I would be willing to sign a petition or maybe go along with it. But as far as me goin' out there in front of the unemployment office to start gettin' together a group, callin' people together and sayin', "We're unemployed . . ." well, I'm not gonna be the first to make the move. I guess the rest of 'em feel the same way; they're not gonna be the first to make the move neither. Therefore, there's no move to make, and the system goes as it is.

KEN DUTTON

He lives with his girl friend in a black neighborhood of one- and two-family houses, declining but not hopelessly blighted, in Seattle. A late-model Ford and a Honda 750 motorcycle are in his driveway. He wears shades, an Afro, sideburns, and a Fu Manchu mustache. He is high-strung, brash, funny. During the interview his phone rings half a dozen times. When a friend driving a delivery van stops in front of the house and honks, he goes to the door.

KEN (shouting): Hey, stupid!

FRIEND: Hey, man, my name's not stupid, it's George.

KEN: I call 'em like I see 'em!

I was born in Portland, Oregon, on January 23, 1956. Grew up in Seattle. I went to college at San Francisco State University, where I did a year and a half before getting drafted into the United States Army.

When I got out, I started doing sheet metal work. Joined the Laborer's

International Union. But there's so many men out of work that the jobs only come once in a while. Last year I worked nineteen days for a steel company. Then I worked twenty-three days for a ship repair place. And that's it. Nothing for the last three months.

So I've been waiting for my name to get to the top of the list at the union, and at the same time I'm looking for something steady. This will give you an idea of what it's like. A few weeks ago I got a hint that Alcoa was starting to take applications. So I went to Alcoa in Vancouver at about 5:30 in the morning for an interview at 8:00. When I got there, there were already twenty people, and it just so happens they take twenty applications a day. The twenty people were already there, so I left. Came back the following Monday because they do it once a week. OK, I went there that time at 3:30 in the morning. There's twenty people there. OK, the next week I went back again, and it was at 2:10 in the morning. Twenty people there. So the next Monday I pulled a gimmick. I went in and talked to the night watchman to find out just about when people start coming. So me and a friend of mine, we rode out there at ten o'clock Sunday night. Camped out [laughs]. And we stayed from ten o'clock till eight o'clock to get interviewed. The fun thing about it was on that Monday, instead of taking twenty, they took thirty. And the thirtieth person didn't get there till about eight o'clock in the morning.

But we got interviewed. You fill out your application; then you get interviewed. And then if you passed the interview, which only seven of us thirty did, you get scheduled for a physical. And I mean a Class A physical. Everything from the doctor sliding on his little rubber gloves. . . . And I passed the physical. So I was told to call back the next day and find out what was going on. I called, and the guy told me we would end up on the waiting list. Meantime, while all this is going on, my name got called down at the union hall and I got scratched because I wasn't there to go out on a job.

OK. Since then, I been to the electric company, pestered Alcoa a number of times, been to Boeing, White Freightliners. I've been to a lot of places I can't think of offhand. And I've been to the Federal Building, making inquiries about what kinds of jobs there are. Openings for veterans qualified to shoot tanks. I'm a gunner and a driver on a tank. Nobody wants to hire me [laughs]. Nobody runs up and down the street with tanks no more, so. . . . If there's another riot in the United States, I might get a gig. If they need tanks. Probably wouldn't go, though.

So my basic day is running around. I ride my motorcycle, do favors for my friends. I could sit up and read, but after a while that would get monotonous. I don't like playing chess with myself. I could go shoot pool, which I really enjoy, but that could get tiresome. I'm learning to play tennis, but it gets tiresome by yourself. I can go see a few of my partners, the ones that don't work, but that would get tiresome 'cause all they're gonna do is sit up and get high and talk about the old days, think

of something dishonest to do, and look to see how many police cars are passing their house. That would get tiresome. So what do you do all day long? I dabble in all those things. I may do one for a week or two, and I'll quit that. Take up something else just to break the boredom.

A lot of times I sit up and watch the Late Late Show. It goes off at three o'clock in the morning. My old lady and the kids are in bed. And I sit up and look through how much money I got to pay out this month. And wonder, well, which source am I gonna pluck it from? And I just say, "Look at me. I'm doing nothing. I got nothing to show for it." I got television, stereo, car, motorcycle, and stuff. I got a little more than other people have. But when it's time for me to die, I want to have something to show for my life. I mean, I don't want to have an outrageous bank account; I just want to have something to show for it. I have intentions of buying a boat one day. And I don't mean a boat; I mean a full-size cruiser. 'Cause when I do things, I like to do them right. I don't want everything the rich have got. I just want to have something so when I feel like I don't want to ride my motorcycle today, I want to go ride on the Sound, I can go do it. I don't think I'd be happy with so much money that I couldn't spend it all. I believe in spending money. That way I know somebody else has got a job to build whatever I want. And as long as they spend money, somebody else has to work, and it just goes around. But whenever somebody up on top decides they're not gonna invest money, the thing stops. And that means boredom. Thinking about knocking off a whole bunch of rich people just for the hell of it. See how far the money falls down, and to who [laughs].

A man has to be able to have something to show. Because when you get ready to sit back, take it easy, you don't wanna. . . . I don't intend to work the rest of my life. I don't want to have to work thirty-five years to be able to draw those benefits or all that other jive. I want to have mine where I don't have to have a lawyer jump on the Teamsters or whoever to say, "Where's my check?" And I don't really appreciate having to accept unemployment. I mean, right now, today, I can get out and break laws and make a bundle of money right now. 'Cause I watched other people and seen their errors, and I learn from my own errors, so I don't make the same mistake twice. I could get now to where I don't have to work. And I can drive a big Cadillac, live in a penthouse apartment, all that. Have women working for me. And have the police always trying to kick in my door. See, that's fast, easy money, and it can't last long. And I don't want it. And see, you got to make an awful lot to be able to get in and get out of it. If you get into big business, if you get in there and get good at it, they ain't gonna let you out that easy 'cause they know they got somebody good. The only way you ever gonna get out is in a box.

But I think about it. When I got on a plane flying back from Vietnam, my mind said, "OK, when I get out of the Army, either I'm gonna do it all or I'm gonna hang it up." When I say do it all, that means organized

crime, because it's easy to get into. I mean, up in the big-business organized crime. You may not be up on the high ladder, but you'll be making a nice income. Knocking over places, touching people up for somebody. But to me, to be able to do all this, a fellow's gotta have about \$10,000 to \$20,000 in his bank. That way you can buy your own lawyer, buy your own doctor to look after you. Then you gotta have two or three good nuts. They're stone crazy. When you say, "Kill," they kill [laughs]. They don't ask any questions. But they got to be just smart enough to have sense. You don't walk up in broad daylight and blow somebody away. You got to use tact. You use silencers. You bump 'em off at your convenience. I got that all figured out, good enough to where I know I won't get caught.

At least it's an alternative. They always preach about whatever trade you learn in the service, you can use in civilian life. Well, nobody's hiring any gunners today. I distinguished on an M60 A-1 tank, which is a medium-size tank. I'm a qualified sharpshooter with the M-16, sub-machine gun, .45 automatic. You know anybody that needs one of those [laughs]? I can break a lot of military codes 'cause I worked with the company commander. Nobody's trying to get me to spy on anybody, so that's out. It wouldn't do me any good anyway. I ain't patriotic, but I ain't gonna be no fool.

But if the rich people can do it, why can't us little criminals do it? And if I get caught, well, what the hell, all they can do is put me in jail, and I was born in jail. I couldn't ever do things I wanted to do, so I'm in jail. Same thing a person in jail goes through. He can't do everything he wants to do. He can live. He wants to live. But he's locked up. I'm locked up, too. I ain't gonna go through all this to get ahead since nobody gets ahead except the people that are already born ahead.

So if the president and all the power structure don't think of something pretty soon, and everybody's unemployed, that seven point whatever it is of the population that ain't working is going to get tired. They're gonna start making jobs by tearing up shit [laughs]. They're gonna have to build that shit back. Somebody's gonna have to build back. See, if all those geniuses up there don't like to get dirt under their fingernails, they're gonna have to pay somebody to put all that shit back. So . . . phooey.

KAREN LEWIS

We're on the front porch of an aging wooden house in a southern Mississippi village. She is twenty-two, a small black woman with two

children, no husband, and few prospects other than training in business skills that she receives at a trade school in the county seat, twenty-five miles away. Her schooling is paid for by the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA).

Her voice at first is neutral, guarded. It changes as she talks about the village—still ruled by age-old racial codes—in a bitterly matter-of-fact tone. It's the tone of someone trapped but not yet resigned.



When I got out of high school, I started work at Talvert Industrial. I quit that because it was too far away from home, and I got a job at Alltree Fashion. It was sewing and making shirts. You have to make so many a day, and I couldn't keep up. I worked there for eight months. You're only supposed to stay there for a three-month trial period, and then if you can't meet their qualifications, they're supposed to let you go. But they were gonna let me stay because the work I was doing was good. The head boss said I could stay. But they got a lady at this job, and if she say she don't like you and she don't want you to work, you don't work. We had got into an argument one weekend, and the next week I got laid off. They said it was because I couldn't keep up, but I knew it was because this lady wanted me to go. So I went.

Besides Alltree and Froeling Electronics, there's hardly anyplace to work around here. They got this gravel pit, and they got this rock place where they make little rocks that go in goldfish bowls. I tried there and they told me they wasn't hirin' right then but they would be later on. They told me to come back in a week, and I went back in a week and they had hired this white girl. If you don't know the white people here, you don't get no job. So I was out of work about six months. Drawin' \$35-a-week unemployment. Then it started to run down, and I decided the onliest way I could get a job was to take a trade. I decided to go to the trade school.

What do most blacks here do when they get out of high school?

If they have children, they go on welfare; if they don't, they have to go out of town to get a job. Most men work on the railroad or offshore. They got a few at Froeling 'cause Froeling knows they're gonna do whatever they tell 'em to do. And the hard job is at the sawmill. That's mostly black 'cause white people don't want no hard job.

Why didn't you go on welfare?

Well, when my unemployment ran out, I went to get welfare. It took from March to July to get my first check. And then they told me to go

back and check my unemployment. I didn't know I could re-sign and get an extension. The man told me I could re-sign, so I just got that one check from welfare and went back on unemployment. 'Cause the unemployment was more money. On welfare they give you \$86 a month if you're alone and \$112 if you have a child. Well, \$35 a week is more than \$112 a month. And even after the unemployment started to run out again and I was getting \$17 a week, I decided to let welfare alone. I didn't want to go through it. You got to tell who your boyfriend is, and they come to your house and check on you. Nobody wants to go through that 'lessen you're extremely lazy. Lazy people will do it. But I just didn't want to, and Momma told me, "Don't worry about it."

So I finally figured school would be my best out. See, this is a small town. And everything here is run by white people. The onliest way to get a job is to know 'em. Like the lady who got me fired, she works at the boss's house and then works at the factory for the same salary. She goes to the house and starts work at seven. The boss has to be at work a little bit before seven. So she goes and gets his little girl off to school. She stays there, cleans up, cooks. And when she gets through there, she comes to work at Alltree Fashion till about eight at night. That's if she doesn't have to go back to the boss's house and cook. She works both jobs for the same salary. So you know they're gonna keep her.

The white people have to know your family. If somebody hadda known my mother and father real good, I coulda got a job. But by them not knowing them, it was hard. Somebody else black could come along, and if the personnel lady knew her family real well, she coulda got a job right then. The personnel lady is the most important. 'Cause mostly the boss is gonna say to her, "Well, do you know her? Do you think she'll do?" And if she says, "Yeah," you're hired.

How do you get to know the white people?

If your family don't work for 'em or somethin', you get to know the white people by starin' up in their face grinnin' . . . [laughs mockingly]. Sayin', "Yas, suh," and things like that. And if they tell you to lick the ground, you do it. That's how you get to 'em. 'Cause this is something like still a slavery town. It was so much under slavery at one time that most people are scared to let themselves go and say, "It's not slavery no more. I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do." There's some places you're not free to go in. Like in the drugstore, they got this little counter where you go and buy ice cream. If you're black, you can't sit there. And at the café, black people don't go in the front. They know better. There's a table in the kitchen, and you sit in the kitchen.

They got this man here, his name is W. B. Davis. He's white. He owns the loan company. If he knows you well or if you owe him, you go and

tell him you need a job 'cause you can't pay your bills next month. He'll get on the phone and call, and you're gonna get a job. No doubt about it. You're gonna get a job somewhere. If they ain't got no openings at Froeling, he's gonna call around till he finds you a job. And if they don't want you there really, when he says you're through payin' him they might let you get one more check, and then they let you go. That's why most people say if you owe him, stay in debt if you want to keep your job. It don't have to be that much, but stay in debt.

Like this one lady, she came to town and she said she wanted a job. She looked to me like the type that didn't want one. But she had to get one 'cause welfare wouldn't give her nothin'. So people told her, "All you gotta do is go and tell W. B. a lie and borrow some money. When you miss the first payment and he comes to you and asks you why, you tell him you ain't got no job. Tell him where you want to work and you'll get a job." She did it. She got a job. All you got to do is borrow some money and miss the note.

Why didn't you borrow some money and get a job?

I did borrow some once. I borrowed \$6 and I had to pay him \$7.25. He's high interest. But it don't make no sense to get no job that way. You either be owin' him the rest of your life, or you're gonna get laid off. I wouldn't want to work awhile and then be laid off and be broke again.

I knew it was gonna be hard to find a job, but I didn't know it was gonna be as hard as it is. 'Cause I've heard most people say to get your high school education and you can get a job. Well, you don't have to have no high school. You can have a eighth-grade education, and if the white man knows you, you got a job; you can have a college degree, and if he don't want you to work, you ain't gonna work. Not unless you go out of town. A white lady can be dumb and not know how to write her name, and I can fill out the application and spell everything right; but by her color being a little lighter than mine she gets the job. And I can go on back home and start all over again.

My friend Sally, she went to college and got her master's degree and went out there to put in an application at the welfare office. They told her straight out they don't hire black people. They didn't hardly say, "We don't have no openings." They told her, "We don't hire black people." Now, if I hadda been there and they would've made me mad enough, I would've went further. I would've took 'em to court and took it as far as I could. Then, when I found out that I could get the job, and they know I could get the job, I would've just left it alone.

Right now I'm studying to be a clerk-typist. I got seven months to go. We take record keeping, filing, English, math, typing, office procedure, accounting, and personality development. Personality development

tells how you should act around people. How to groom yourself, stuff like that. I like it 'cause whether or not you get a job when you get out, you've still been and learned something. Even if you can't get a job in what you majored in. Most government jobs, like the post office, you have to have the civil service test. And you have to leave Mississippi in most cases. 'Cause in Mississippi you won't get a black person in the post office or a black person in the bank. No way. You don't get no job in the post office, not black. Oh, you might get a job carryin' mail to the houses, but if you want a job in the office, you don't get that. Working behind the window, you don't get that. Black people not qualified for it, so they say.

I want to be a clerk-typist, but if I can't be a clerk-typist and I pass the civil service test, I want to be a state trooper. Which I doubt they'll let me be. At least I'm gonna try. I'll have to go farther than Mississippi. Up north or west, somewhere like that. Not in the South. These people in Mississippi are not right, I'm tellin' you. Not on the job thing, not on gettin' money. No kinda way. Everybody here know that no black faces ain't gonna get behind no desks.

THEODORE CARDENAS

We meet at the Youth Employment Society (YES), a private, non-profit agency that offers high school level classes and job placement help to New York City dropouts, most of them ghetto kids in trouble with the law. In the reception area, teenagers lounge in metal chairs and pore over textbooks. Down the hall, counselors in suits talk to clients in jeans and Pro-Keds. Photographs, abstract art, and posters with pointers on jobhunting decorate the walls. We talk in an empty classroom.

He is nineteen, of Dominican ancestry. He is hefty, bullnecked, with short, curly black hair; he wears slacks, a double-knit shirt, and a cross on a chain around his neck. His soft voice comes as something of a surprise.



I was born in New York, and I lived in New York all my life. I was raised up in Manhattan, on East Broadway, the Lower East Side. Then we moved to Fourth Street. And here's where I began to get myself into

lots of trouble. I was only ten. And I grew up seeing so many things—drugs, stealing, everything. The works. Even before I moved to Fourth Street I used to get into a lot of fights. I always loved to box, and my father would sometimes see that I was scared of fighting. He would say, "You better fight, and if you don't fight I will whip your ass when you get upstairs." And then again he would say, "And if you lose the fight, I will still whip your ass." So I grew up and I always wanted to win the fight. But about a year after we moved, my father booked the premises, you might say [laughs]. Now my mother has been separated from him for about seven years. So she was taking care of us. There were five of us altogether—three boys and two girls. She was on welfare. She still is.

When I moved to Fourth Street, I was doing good in school for at least a year. I was doing good. But then I see that the younger generation—and I was that age, too—would just smoke cigarettes behind their mother and cut classes, and as I seen these things, I was doin' 'em, too. I would say, "Well, follow that person 'cause what they're doin' is right." So I went up through the tenth grade, but after that I think I just went about a month and then quit. I found that school wasn't no good for me. In class I would act like a regular little kid, start jumpin' here and there, playin' with the people. Plus I always had the street in my mind. I always thought the street was better than school. I wouldn't know why. I found myself cursing teachers out, throwing erasers, hitting teachers in the necks with paper clips, stuff like that. I was a menace [laughs]. So after I came out of school, I wouldn't go home and study. I would go downstairs and call one of my friends and go cop an ounce or half an ounce and just smoke and drink, whatever.

We just constantly kept on doing this every day. And pretty soon everybody was gettin' into this. More and more drugs kept on comin' in, and there wasn't no embarrassment about it. People doin' it right in the street. And the buildings were kinda getting abandoned. We'd throw garbage inside of buildings, try to burn them down—arson and stuff like that. 'Cause sometimes we would go into a building and get hurt. We didn't want to get hurt no more. We'd see glue sniffers goin' in there, drug addicts. People would get raped in that building. So we'd decide to burn it so that they won't use the building. We'd try to knock it down completely. We didn't want to see it no more. We just wanted to have it plain, like a desert. These days I sometimes wind up comin' down there just to see how it looks, and there's only two buildings standing up. Out of at least fifteen or sixteen that were there.

When I was about thirteen I started stealing, mugging. I would go into apartments, just open up the window or break the doors down. Me and a group. I was also stealing in churches. Some people say not to steal in churches 'cause it's bad, but we would go in churches and just wreck everything and steal what was there. And on my same block there was a

grocery store right on the corner. Everybody seemed to be hitting this store all the time. They would hit it through the side of the walls, the ceiling. . . . Me and my friends managed to break under it from the basement through the floor. Sometimes we would try to get into a check-cashing place or something that's worth something. We would just keep on constantly hitting churches, grocery stores, apartments, beating kids off their bikes. I was also in a gang, called the Young Dynos.

I had a pistol. I remember one time, right across the street from where I lived, me and my friends put on masks, and we went with the pistol and knocked on a door. We put the gun to the man's face, told him to take off his clothes and just lay on the floor, and we racked up on the place. Just tore the whole place apart, and took our time 'cause we wasn't really scared. And another time they grabbed me trying to burn the school down. With cocktail bombs. Y'know, you take a bottle and fill it with gasoline and put a rag in the top. We wanted to get rid of the school. Burn up one of the classrooms that was one of my major classes I didn't like. There was nobody in there; the school was closed. But I didn't say this in court. I said to them I wasn't there, and a friend of mine was telling the same story so we managed to beat that case. When I was young I was going to court constantly. Since I wasn't over sixteen, I knew they couldn't do nothin' to me, so I would keep on doing these things.

I was getting busted like every week, you could say. But I was never hooked on drugs. I always managed never to get hooked. I would take dope once or twice a month. Coke, I would take maybe once every few weeks. 'Cause I would see what it had done to my friends. I would hold the belt around their arms, help them take it, but I never put it in my arm. Never. Never. I just snorted. I can't tell you why. And the cops would pick me up and look for scars. I always had scars, but from burglaries, burns, beatings . . . but never no track marks 'cause I never used drugs through my veins. Never skinned. Just snorted once in a blue moon. My thing was always grass.

I never had any jobs, not where I was actually hired. Sometimes I would go in a restaurant and ask the man if I could wash plates for him. Or in supermarkets, I'd pack things. I got those jobs because maybe sometimes my friends wouldn't be around. Or I might feel like trying to win money honestly. A few dollars, just chump change, to buy some glue or a joint or something. Not really to win \$15 or \$20 'cause I would say to myself, "That's too much hard work." Because I'm the kind of guy—when I was younger—that if I'm gonna be wasting my time in the supermarket trying to win \$20, I'd just go around the corner and mug somebody for maybe more.

Every now and then I would go out and look for a job because my

mother wanted me to do it. And I figured that maybe if I did have a job, it would keep me from stealing too much 'cause I was doing that every day. Like I would get up in the morning, and right there [raps his hand on the table] my friends would be waiting for me, just to look around all day for a house, an apartment, a factory. I always had my mind on stealing and mugging. So when I went out to look for a job, I found I wasn't too persistent. I'd go for a half an hour, an hour, and then I'd say, "Psheew. Forget it. These people don't wann . . . I don't give a fuck anymore." Sometimes I'd just go for the walk. I'd go to Delancey Street, Fourteenth Street maybe. I'd ask one store and come back. "Yeah, Mama, I went out, but. . . ." She'd say, "Well, that's good, at least you tried."

But little by little, when I got older, I seen that I was constantly doing these things, and I wanted to do better for myself. I would look at my mother, and sometimes I felt real bad, seeing her, 'cause she suffered a lot. I seen how much I made her suffer. And my mind started changing all of a sudden after I went to jail on Rikers Island. I had got into YES before that. I talked to my probation officer from when I was a youthful offender, and she got me into here. My mother was on my case, and my father was on my case even though he wasn't living in the house. So I came to YES and they got me a job over here on Sixth Avenue. I was doing very fine over there. People were willing to help me. I was enjoying it 'cause people were recognizing—not seeing me just like a Puerto Rican who ain't worth nothing. But I seen that I wasn't making very good money, and I would always think of my so-called friends. So I kept on stealing and stuff.

Then one night, when I was eighteen, I was busted for stealing a taxicab. I was with a group of four people, and I was high on Placidyls, the first time I ever took it. I took three Placidyls, and since my mother was always nervous, she had Valiums, and I opened the bottle and took some of them. And I was smoking. So I went with the fellows, and we were all ripped. We were walking through midtown. My friend managed to see a taxi with the keys in it. The owner of the taxi was talking to another man on the corner about three feet away. So I told my friend, "Go around the taxi to the passenger side, and I'll take the driver's seat." We wanted the money in the taxi. I turned the key, and the man heard the engine turn over and he tried to grab the door. I was panicked, and I wasn't looking at the shift, but I just managed to hit the gas and get the taxi in drive. When I turned the corner the man was still holding the door. The street was a two-way street and I went up it the wrong way. And a cop stopped me and he said, "You got registration for this taxi?" And I go, "Yes, sir," and I stepped on the gas again. I ran seven or eight blocks. They chased me. I turned the corner and crashed into three other cars. My friend's face hit the windshield, but he managed to get out of the car and hide under another one. So I got busted. And when I went to

court I tried to impress them by showing them I had a job and I was going to school at YES. But the judge said, "You gotta learn your lesson." So he sentenced me to a year. I didn't take it too hard 'cause I always thought that if you do the crime, you gotta be ready to do the time.

That conviction was my first—except when I was a youthful offender—and I think it'll be my last. 'Cause I don't want to go back behind bars. It's a whole different world in there. Always gotta be fighting, all the time. I think I never fought so much out here as I fought in there. I think I had about sixteen or seventeen fights, and that was in five and a half months. Y'know, fights over commissary—things you eat. Your sneakers. Clothes you wear. State stuff. It's crazy. If you don't know nobody in jail, you might as well hang it up. I'm lucky I had some fellows I know from out here. They would say, "Keep away, don't be botherin' him."

In jail there's a thing they call PC, protective custody. You can ask to be put in a cell with another group that don't like to fight. I didn't play that 'cause I figured I could do my time in a regular dorm. And they look down at you if you play PC, especially if you have a friend in there; he'll say, "Ah, you played PC." And like I said, if you can't do the time, don't do the crime. Well, I did the crime, so I showed them I could do the hard time. But if people woulda kept on fighting with me, I think I woulda played PC. 'Cause I just wanted to get out. My mind was runnin'. For two months I had a lot of problems. My mind was tickin' all the time: how my family feels, what I wanna do with myself, am I gonna spend my life in jail? I see young fellows go from Spofford* to Rikers, from Rikers to upstate. They spend all their young life in jail. And that scared me. Even though Rikers is just an institution, it's not like a jail where you're behind bars. It's fences and everything. Where you're really talking about jail is upstate someplace, Attica, Dannemora. Where you see nothin' but bars and rifles pointed at your face. Rikers is just everyday punk-ass motherfuckers like out here in the street.

So I did seven months in Rikers and four in a rehabilitation program. And it changed my mind around. When I came out I wanted to do the good things. I came back to YES and they found me a job in a clothes factory. But I quit that place 'cause I felt it wasn't enough money, and I was comin' from the Bronx—I moved my mother and family up to the Bronx 'cause Fourth Street was too much—to Brooklyn, then to Manhattan to go to school at YES, and then from Manhattan back to the Bronx. I couldn't do it. Now I'm trying to get a job in Manhattan near YES. But it's been five months now, and it's kinda hard to find a job. Some places won't accept me 'cause I got a record. Other places want references, and I ain't got a good reference from the factory 'cause I quit.

*The youth detention facility of New York City.

Some of my friends who got jobs, they tell me to go to such-and-such a place. They give me the address, and I go check it out. Sometimes they turn me down; they say, "No, we don't got no openings." So I keep on going from building to building. I ask the super to give me the address of where the landlord is, and I go to the landlord and ask if he could put me into a super's job, where I could clean and mop down the building. But they say no 'cause you have to be able to work the boiler, too. I go into clothes places, where they sell clothes, and they say, "No, you can see we have too many people already." I've been all along Thirty-fourth Street, Twenty-third Street, Fourteenth Street. It makes me feel real down, bad, that they don't want me. But I always have that persistence, like if I'm knocked down, I'll keep on getting up and doing it again. I always manage to keep it up.

My intention now is to finish in YES and get my GED,* and then I plan to go to college. What I'm gonna do is get myself into computers, electronics, something that pays for the future. I always have it in my mind to start stealing and mugging, but I always try to see the positive side and say, "No, it doesn't pay. It's not worth it. You don't want to see yourself behind bars." Hangin' out? I don't believe in it no more. So even though it goes into my mind, it goes outa my mind, too. Like my brother, he's still stealing. And once I said to him, "Bro, I'm gonna go steal with you." He said, "No, man, you ain't gonna go steal 'cause I don't want to see you in jail." And I said, "No, I'm only kidding you." Really, it goes through my mind, 'cause I see my brother do these things, and he gets away with them, some of them. And I say, "Boy, if he can get away with it, then maybe I could." But then I say, "No, I can't do it. I'm not interested in trying my luck." And I sit down and talk to him and I say, "I wanna see you better yourself. I don't want to see you in a position where I have to go visit you in jail." And he understands. I think his mind is getting together, too. He got busted twice for breaking and entering, so he sees it's starting to catch up to him.

I'm gonna show my mother I can do it. That's my goal. To make my mother happy. And to make myself happy, too.

TOM BURDETTE

Another YES client. He is eighteen, a gangly, shy black youth in a striped T-shirt and jeans. His right hand is wrapped with gauze tape—a basketball injury. He looks contentedly around the classroom as we

*General Equivalency Diploma

talk. "School is different here. If you miss a day, they don't send a letter home. It's more like a grown-up atmosphere. And they don't know me here. My rep didn't follow me. They just took me for Tom, instead of "Oh, that dumb nigger, that bad guy."



I was born in New Jersey. Lived there till I was two. My father, he went crazy on us, so we had to move to Brooklyn. When I was ten we moved to Harlem, and it seems like that's when everything went downhill. It started out like I couldn't behave in school. One week I'd be in school and one week I'd be expelled. Then I'd come back and cool out for a week, and then I'd be out again. By the time I hit the seventh grade none of the teachers wanted me in the classroom. It got to the point where I'd come in school, and I'd be plannin' I wasn't gonna stay. And the first time the teacher said somethin' like "Sit up," I'd say, "What!" And I'd go. That would be my excuse. I'd be gone the rest of the day. I don't know, I never could handle school. I couldn't take the confinement. The problem went as far back as kindergarten. As long as I can remember, I couldn't juggle it. I had to go 'cause my mother still had the reins on me then, but I wasn't doin' nothin'. I can't think of one day I went to school that I wasn't in trouble.

Then I got to junior high and that's when the reefer broke out, and the gangs and all that. That's when everything was just the streets, the wine, the herb, and all of that. The more I hung out, the more I learned. The first thing I learned was to jump up on the trains for free. The next thing was how to snatch a pocketbook. How to yoke . . . that's like you follow a person, and instead of goin' in their pocket and takin' the money, you just grab 'em by the neck like this [mimics a headlock]; then you take their money. You learn that, and you learn the hustle with the cars and the watches. That's when two of you walk up to a car, and the person on one side, he ask 'em the time. They tell you the time, the other person snatch the watch off their hand. That's all I learned in like four years. It wasn't happenin' that quick, but it went from one to the other. The older I got, the more they would let me into. 'Cause it was like the big dudes was schoolin' the little dudes on how to do it. So when the big dudes got too old to do it theirselves, they'd get to be our boss, and we'd be givin' what we made to them.

When I was fourteen I got kicked out of my house. I was sittin' there smokin' reefer and I got high and I left a joint in the ashtray, and my mother had always told me that if she ever caught me with it, I was out, y'know. So that was like the beginning of the end. She busted that, and when she was packin' my stuff, she found an ounce in a shoebox, and

that was really it. She threw me out. So I was livin' in the back of my aunt's house in a car. I was sleepin' there, and in the daytime I'd be out in the streets.

By that time I was dealin' dope and reefer. I used to see it all the time. The brothers that was teachin' me to steal said, "Here, sell a little reefer, too." And I saw dope before I even saw reefer. I'd be goin' to school and used to see the guys, and I'd say, "Wow, what's wrong with them?" They'd be sittin' here like this [mimics addict nodding sleepily]. And they'd say, "Those are dope addicts." And when I came back at night, I'd happen to see 'em passing the money and the dope. So I saw that before I saw reefer. But I never did it myself. I smoked all the herb and all the coke, but I wasn't shootin' no dope. Nah, I'm scared of needles. I couldn't put no needle in my arm. Nah. Unh-Unh. Especially when I was dealin' because then you be shootin' up the profits. You can't do that. That's why if you're a reefer dealer, you can't smoke and deal 'cause you got it right there and you smokin' up what you supposed to be dealin'. I learned that the hard way. If you dealin' for somebody, usually how they run it down is you can smoke three or four joints as long as you get off ten or twenty. And it's hard to sit there if business ain't too good and you ain't high. So you say, "What the hell.," and the next thing you know, bang, it's gone. I think I still got the lump on the back of my head from the time I learned that. The nigger beat my ass. He beat it bad, too. He was a big, black nigger. Big ugly turkey [laughs]. I think it was about a good hour's ass kickin' that night. I never got beat that bad.

So for about a year and a half I was dealin' both reefer and dope. I would go to the methadone center around the corner and cop, and then I'd go out to Brooklyn, to my old neighborhood. Dealin' mostly to brothers a little older than me. But after a while I figured I gotta deal just reefer 'cause the dope was drawin' too much heat. Too many wrong people. And I was just a skinny dude. It seemed like I'd be gettin' took off more than I'd be dealin' if I kept on. 'Cause soon as the word get out that you don't walk with a piece or nothin', when you go to sell something, the niggers as soon as they see it, they gonna jump you and take what you got. And then I mighta been dead. So I jumped out of it before it could happen, before I got a real rep. I can't really explain why I stopped right then. It's just a feelin' sometimes that says you better stop before something really goes wrong. Anyway, I wasn't gettin' all the money to myself, and I couldn't give any to my mother, which is why I got into it in the first place, because she wouldn't take none. I moved into it because I felt funny taking money from her. It was a feeling like I was pimping, in other words. Her workin' seven days a week, and I'm takin' and never givin'. I just felt funny that way. But when I was dealin', she wouldn't take anything from me. And I was only makin'

about \$100 a week. I would bring in \$400 or \$500, but I had to give it mostly to the dude I was dealin' for. And I had to buy all my own stuff, my clothes and all that.

But I never then thought about gettin' a job. Not no job. I felt like, who would want me? I just felt worthless. I used to come in the house and my aunt would say, "You still out there?" "Yeah." "Why don't you get a job?" Then everybody in the family would start in. "Get a job!" They'd sit around me—I'm sittin' like this, Uncle Leon and everybody else standin' around me like this, and I'm sittin' here like I'm on trial or somethin'. I'm sweatin' and everything. . . . [laughs]. So I'd say I was gonna do it to please them. But as soon as I go out of the house, it'd be "Joints and bags! Joints and bags!" Work? That was a curse. That was like a bad word.

I just felt like, who would want me? I realize now I never even went out and looked. It was just that things was really down. Nothin' to look forward to. Every day was the same. And I just said, "Oh, what the hell, I might as well go out there and be on the street as go out and get my feelings hurt tryin' to find work." And I always heard if you ain't got that piece of paper, you can't get it. And I knew I didn't have that. So it just seemed like everything was sayin' no, so I just didn't even try.

When I was fifteen I went and pleaded to my moms to let me back in the house. So she let me in, but that got messed up again. The house got robbed. And being as how I hung out with all these people, she thought I had set it up so I wouldn't be there, and I had told my friends when she wouldn't be there. She thought I robbed her. That was it. I was gone again. Back to the car in my aunt's driveway.

I was dealin' reefer for a long time. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was money. I did it in Brooklyn in the same neighborhood, around the school. Joints, bags. I brought back the trey bag 'cause nobody was dealin' treys. And I was tryin' to figure out how could I get a name, y'know? So I'd just give 'em five joints for \$3. It was really the old five-for-three, only it was in a bag instead of in joints. I don't know what it is—people wanna take bags instead of joints. They'd rather have a bag. They're gettin' the same thing. So I figured that out, and that's what I did.

And I used to—I'll never forget this [laughs]. I had bought an ounce of gold. And somehow we smoked just about all of it. And I said, "Damn, what I'm gonna do? I don't have no money." So I shot upstairs and looked in my uncle's room and I pulled out the oregano. And I poured oregano in there and mixed it up with that. Then I went out there and told them it was the stuff, and I got all my money back. And they got high. That's what cracked me up. They got high. I'm sittin' there and they're sayin', "Yeah, this is the joint," and I'm sayin', "Yeah, I know," and I'm tryin' to keep from laughin'. So I started to do that, just jerk 'em

off for all their money. But later I said, "No, I better just not smoke it all up." I don't know, it mighta got 'em high. I had a little bit of stuff in there, just a little bit. You put a little at the beginning, a little at the middle, and a little at the end. So when they light it, it smells like herb, and then they smoke the tea till they get in the middle, and when they get to the end they smell a little more weed. That way I keep 'em goin'.

I'd go out to the school, and I'd be playin' ball or somethin'. People would come in the park, they'd say, "Who got the joints?" I'd stop the game, go in my pocket, give 'em what they want, keep playin'. And by them sayin' who's sellin' this or that, on a typical day I'd just sit there in one spot. When business got slow, I'd yell, "Joints and bags," just in case anybody new came in. But mostly you'd just sit there and somebody walk up to you and say, "Anybody got that herb?" And you say, "Yeah, I got, what you want?" And that was it. The reefer didn't last long 'cause I didn't have enough money to buy right weight. So I'd make maybe \$30 a day. Some days I'd make \$30; some days, \$20. When it rained, I didn't make nothin'. When it was cloudy, I didn't make much.

I never done no mugging or breaking and entering, stuff like that. I never had the heart for that, I don't know why. I used to have a partner named Larry, and he used to say that all the time: "Let's go break in a house." I'd be high enough to want to do it but sober enough to know I better not. So we'd get to the house and I'd look at it, and I'd look at him, and I'd just say, "Oh, wow." I'd have some kind of excuse and I'd just break away. I just couldn't do it. I could sell dope, but I really had a heart. 'Cause I knew how it felt to be robbed, so I wouldn't rob somebody else. You come home, turn on your lights, and everything's gone. I couldn't juggle with that. I had less conscience dealin' dope than robbin' somebody's house.

When I went back in the car the second time, it was about a year. About the time of my eighteenth birthday I figured it was about time to check in and see if I could get back home. 'Cause by then I was sayin', "Wow, I'm really sick of this. I'm tired of doin' this." So I went there and I rapped to my moms, and at first she really didn't want to let me in. She had the door on a chain lock. But I told her I ain't got nowhere else to go. The car was gettin' smaller by the day. She said if anything, anything, break crazy, I was never comin' back. So I moved back in. 'Cause there just nothin' happenin' with the streets. Nothin' out there. Just standin' on the corner, drink beer, smoke herb, sell reefer. At first it's fun 'cause it's something new. But after about a year of seein' the same faces coming back, the same streets, the same boulevards, the same people, the same stores, the same numbers runners. . . .

So one day I said, "Yeah, I think I know what to do." I pulled out my ounce of reefer and poured it on the bus floor. I just said, "I'm through." Just poured it on the bus floor. God strike me dead right here. I was sittin' on the back of the bus. I was sittin' and thinkin'. And I said,

"Damn," and I had it in my pocket, and I pulled it out and threw it on the floor. Opened it up and poured it all out. Took out the Bambu, the joints, and everything. And I said, "I done threw away my money, somethin' gotta go right."

It was just—I guess I grew up. I just seen it wasn't right; it wasn't gettin' me nowhere. I guess 'cause I seen a lot of people that had been doin' what I was doin', I seen them gettin' jobs and stuff. "Wow, how do they do it? Has that nigger got a job?" We used to sit there and talk about him: He's stupid; he ain't gettin' no money. But in the back of your mind you're sayin', "Damn, I wish I had that job." 'Cause when you see people gettin' things, and they can be proud, I guess. . . . He'd come back, and instead of like stoppin' and smokin' a joint, he stop and talk about his job. A lot of us, we used to act like we was interested and then go off and talk about him. But I guess when we all broke up and went by ourselves, we really wish we was him. We'd say, "Yeah, the nigger think he a Rockefeller now just 'cause he got a job." Then we'd give the same old excuse, you know: "I wouldn't get no job if they gave it to me." All the time wishin' somebody would say, "You want a job?" It got so he wasn't one of the boys no more 'cause he wasn't doin' wrong. But I guess everybody was wishin' they had a job, but everybody felt like, who would want you? What could you do? Ain't got nothin' to offer. Never finished school. Never seen the inside of a high school. Wasn't nothin' else to do but talk about him and wish you had what he had.

But that night, that's really when it changed. That night. I was tired, it was hot, and I just said, "I'm really sick and tired of everything." And I just looked up in the sky, and I said, "Wow, I hope there is somebody up there." I looked at my reefer and all that, and I kicked it and all that. . . . By that time I was wishin' I hadn't done it. But a weird thing happened. I was talking to my grandmother, and she was talkin' about the Bible. And I said, "Oh, hell, not this again." She's kinda old, and they always get into that Bible stuff. And I said, "Yeah, Grandma, I'll read the Bible." And she said, "Read the Lord's Prayer," and I read that, and I didn't understand a thing they had in there. But I read it, and I was lookin' at it, and I put it down and forgot about it. And a few weeks later I got into YES and things started breaking right.

I knew about YES a year before I came here. I was standin' on 165th Street trying to get my stuff off, and my aunt caught me. My aunt Elaine, this was a different one. I turned around and said, "Oh shit!" [Laughs.] "Hi, Aunt Elaine!" I don't know how long she was standin' there, but she must have been there long enough to see what I was doin'. She said, "Oh, you're sellin' joints now, huh?" I said yeah. She took me to her house and showed me all this stuff about CETA and all this. I kept it and just put it away. I didn't jump into YES for a whole year. But after I moved back in with my mother I started thinkin' about it, and I called up. But I had to come through an agency, so it took about two months. I

was sittin' in the house goin' like this [stares at ceiling]. But I never started dealin' again. Not to this day. That was the end. So I really didn't feel that bad because I knew I wasn't doin' nothin' bad. And my mother, she never said stuff like, "You're worthless," or nothin' like that. She just said, "One day, when it's ready to happen, it'll happen."

For the last few months I just been schoolin', mainly. And when I really feel like I'm gonna jump back in the streets, I go talk to my grandmother, and she soothes me for a little while. When you first come in here, it's fun, but then it turns into a regular school. It ain't always fun. Some days you get discouraged, and you be thinkin', "I don't wanna come no more." Whenever I felt that way, I just went and talked to my grandmother. I'd say, "Grandma, I ain't got no money." And she'd say, "Yeah, Tommie, but there's some people that aren't even alive." Stuff like that. Make you think. It seem like she always got sense, make me look at the other side.

So it seem like the sun is shinin'. Feels good. Feels real good. Now I'm goin' down and talkin' to all the fellows out there. My main partner, I talked him into gettin' a job. I talked his brother into gettin' a job. I be walkin' in New York and don't be walkin' just to see what you could steal, but walkin' 'cause I got somewhere to go and somethin' to do. That's nice. I dig that.

MICKY ELDRIDGE

He lives with his wife and two sons in an old town in the Deep South that was once an important trading port. Then the river changed course and left the grand old homes of the town facing onto a picturesque but useless—except to the old men who fish there in the evenings, using long cane poles—backwater. Today the town functions mainly as the civic seat of a rural parish; it attracts tourists rather than industry. Unemployment is high.

A jovial man of twenty-three, he seems more puzzled than enraged by the economic conditions and racism that condemn so many blacks in town to long days of drinking and dominoes on the corner of Market and Pine streets.



The last time I had a regular job was back in '76, around August of last year. Today makes a year and about fifteen days. I was a machine

operator in Atlanta, Georgia. Me and my family had moved out there because there wasn't no jobs here when I got out of the Army. But then my mother-in-law took sick, and we had to make a choice of the whole family movin' back here or just my wife movin' back. I decided that I had been away from home so long that things must have changed. So we moved back, and when I got here I started lookin' for a job. I wanted a job that was worth somethin', that gave you somethin' for your strain and hustle. But the jobs that was open was mostly seasonal jobs, like pickin' cotton or hauling cotton to the oil mill. Workin' three months out of the year, and after that you don't have nothin' to do. It wasn't the type of job I wanted. And I found out that things around here hadn't changed. They had got worse.

How were they worse?

Oh, man, you had guys with master's degrees and teachin' degrees on the corner smokin' dope and drinkin' wine. Trying to ask themselves, "Why did I go through all that if I'm gonna end up like this?" You had guys with no education at all makin' more than guys that went to college for six years. When I saw that, I knew it was gonna be rough. Because not only here but everywhere in the South, you got to hustle to make it. If a guy is payin' you \$3 an hour, he's payin' you good money down here. So you got to bust your butt to get the job and do the job. I found a few construction jobs, like if they needed a few guys for a week or two to lay concrete. But it got to the point where everything was wrapped up. The government stopped building. People stopped building. The one thing I had to rely on was gone. I found myself hangin' around the streets, just asking myself, "Why? Why should I be here? What's goin' on in this town? Why couldn't it be like other places? Who's keepin' the work out of this town?"

I asked a man one time. He was runnin' for mayor, so I asked him, "If you become mayor, would you get jobs in this town?" He says, "I'm gonna tell you honestly. What keepin' work out of this town is three rich men. Some people want to put factories in this town. But as long as those three men got everybody workin' for them on their farms and plantations for \$1.75 an hour, they gonna keep other things out. They don't want factories in here because they're afraid it's gonna cut their end of things." They don't want no competition. Don't want no other rich men to move in. Some of the guys I know work for these men, and if they get into trouble or anything—I'll give you an example. There's this man named Steve Charlton, he owns half the town. And if any of his guys kills somebody or shoots somebody, he just gets the keys himself and goes and unlocks the door to let 'em out. On one occasion he wanted to get one of his guys out of jail. The man told him, "Well, Mr. Charlton, we can't let 'im out." So he said, "You let 'im out, or y'all

move off my land." It was as simple as that. They had to let 'im out. So those rich men won't let nothin' in. They want everything for themselves.

Day after day you go to the unemployment office, and there's nothing. They did open up a paper mill here in town, but during the time they was takin' applications I was away. And when I came back they had changed their policy. They had to interview so many people that they had turned it over to the unemployment office. The unemployment office would interview you and then send you out to the job. The people that owned the mill didn't have to be bothered at all. So if the guy at the unemployment office didn't know you, you still didn't get no job. He picked the people that he knew or that he thought might deserve that kind of money. Like if he knew Steve Charlton, and he knew Steve Charlton was used to big money, he'd try to help his son, so his son could continue to make big money. But if you was just a little ordinary person, he would try to fix you up with a little ordinary job. A job that might be payin' \$2 or \$3 an hour, and you're lucky if you get one for \$3.

A lot of it has to do with being black or white. Because like I said, the only good job around here is the paper mill. That's the only job you can find that's payin' \$4 and \$5 an hour. Well, sometimes I hear guys sayin', "They doin' any hirin' up at the paper mill?" They say, "Yeah, they hired three white guys just the other day." I go over there and ask do they have any openings, and they say, "Nothin' goin' on right now." I just say, "All right." I don't want to start no trouble in there. But even if they did have an opening, it would be for something like sweepin' up floors. This town is so behind, they think the Negro can only do common work. They're not up-to-date. They don't want to realize, or they don't want to give you a chance. I look around and see things like that, and it makes me disgusted.

The young blacks start to get a bad feelin' when they realize these things are goin' on around 'em. They have seen their fathers go through it, and they didn't like it. They see their fathers and grandfathers calling young whites around the age of nineteen, "Yes, sir, no, sir," and the whites calling them, "Yes, boy, do this or that." No respect. And they can be workin' on a job for twenty years and have all that experience, but they never reach a stage where they're managers. They always remain what they were when they first hired on. So a lot of young blacks, even if there's openings in them jobs, kind of fade away from it because they don't want to go on with that. They're afraid they might do something they don't want to do. I have heard a lot of 'em say, "If I was workin' there and he told me, 'Boy, do this,' I'd probably pick something up and knock his head around. 'Cause he didn't hire no boy. When he hired, he hired a man."

And right up here on the square there's a liquor store. I can't un-

derstand it because this store is in the heart of a black area, and there's not a black person workin' in the store. I went there and asked them for a job, and they told me they don't need anybody. And a couple of weeks later I go by and they got three or four new guys. People tell me, "They ain't gonna hire no blacks 'cause everybody else went up there and asked." So I wonder. I say to myself, "The guy can't be that prejudiced 'cause he's in the heart of a black town. There's nobody white around for about a mile or so. And he's makin' a killing." But I went there for a job, and it's just "No way." It makes you bitter, very bitter. You get hate inside. Something you thought you'd never have. You don't realize you're doing it, but you're hating all the time.

So that's why you get all these guys on the corner. Unemployment. I asked one of these guys that went to get a college degree, "What made you do it?" He said, "Because I thought that after I got out there would be something. But I found out that I couldn't even get a job." He told me he would take a job doin' anything, and I believe him. You know, unemployment shows you a lot of things. More guys get into drinking. The ones that wasn't winos begin to be winos. The ones that was smokin' a little dope begin smokin' a lot of dope. It begins to be an everyday thing. Guys start messin' with other guys' wives. I noticed when guys get on unemployment, hassles begin to be in the family. You begin to have a lot of breakups and stuff. The guy is home all the time. There's more arguments than if he went to work at 7:00 and came home at 3:30. He's home all day. She says, "You ain't lookin' for work." It's a hassle on him because he can't find no work. It's a hassle on her because she wants her man to get somethin' for her. She wants support that he can't provide. So he's out on the corner, and he's wondering, "Where can I get some money?" He can't go home because she's gonna fuss, so he gets messed up, gets stoned on dope, gets to drinkin' his wine, and just lays up on the corner somewhere all afternoon. Then he goes home, and he's so messed up I reckon he just falls out.

Do you hang out on the corner, too?

Well, yeah, in a way. I never did have no mind to smoke no dope or anything like that, to go that way. But I get with 'em and I talk to 'em. Whatever they do is all right with me. That's what they want to do, so they're gonna do it. There must be three hundred blacks in my area alone that's unemployed, can't find nothin' to do. Disgusted. Stealing. Some of 'em are really hung up on dope, and they'll do anything to get money. So I hang out and talk to 'em about jobs, 'cause some of 'em are so hung up that if a job came around they wouldn't take it. If somebody comes around lookin' for someone to work maybe one day, they tell me, "Such-and-such a person came around, and I don't feel like workin'."

They get high and they don't look for work, or when they're drunk they don't want to work.

I have a kind of routine. I get up and leave here, say, at six in the morning. Everybody goes up on the corner there of Market and Pine streets. People know they can pass by there if they need somebody to do something. They pass by and ask, "Do you want to work for a day?" So I stay there there sometimes all day. Just sitting around talkin'. That's mainly what we do, just sit around and talk about how many politicians got busted [laughs]. We ask a lot of questions. A lot of blacks have things like that on their minds. They have a lot of things against the white man. They'll say, "Well, how come every time a white man steals somethin' there's somethin' wrong with his mind? Or if he kills a lot of people, there's somethin' wrong with his mind? But if a black man does somethin', they're gonna hang him." The law is for the white man, not the black man. Only the hard part of it is for the black man. You know, every prison in this state is jam-packed. Before unemployment you never did hear about that. Maybe one or two guys would get sent up. But now the guys are stealin', and every jail is jam-packed.

Boy, I'm tellin' you, Carter better get off his butt and push some jobs into these towns. Push it so the guy with the money don't have no voice unless he's gonna get somethin' goin' here. Carter should push some federal factories in here, so these guys with the money cannot say no. 'Cause as long as these little enterprises are gonna come into town and ask, "Can I put up a factory?" they're gonna tell 'em no. They're gonna keep it out. Carter better get off his butt or this country's gonna get worse and worse. 'Cause the United States is a nice place to live, but the system is too loose. You meet Mexicans, Chinamen, any guy that comes from a foreign country can get a job just like that. They send 'em to school with no problem at all. But here you have to fight to go to school, fight to try and get some money, and these guys are comin' from Japan and Israel and invadin' the country and gettin' jobs. I've never seen a Japanese layin' on the corner. 'Cause the government is helpin' 'em. The only people that's on the corner down here is blacks.

On the corner you tend to get into a debate. You get into politics, hard into politics. Because the average person on the corner, he's got a lot of smarts. You don't find too many morons on the corner [laughs]. Mostly smart people are alcoholics or dope fiends. 'Cause they feel the pressure on 'em, and they have to do somethin' to ease their minds. Lots of 'em don't like the system that's goin' on, but they can't express themselves the way they want to. So they get high and let themselves go. They might buy two or three half gallons of wine and just sit on the corner and chat. Just let everything out of 'em.

Of course, it's not only bad around here. Some guys get pushed back from California. They was on their own out there, and they couldn't find

jobs, so it pushed 'em back home because they couldn't hardly make it and they figured probably in a little town they could at least eat. Around here you might not have some money, but if somebody's got a piece of bread, they're gonna give it to you. And on the corner the guys will give you a drink before they'll give you something to eat. There's a lot of guys out there who were away and came back. They don't want to go back there either because it was pretty bad. At least here you can sneak out in the woods and steal a watermelon or a potato or something. In the city you can't. I know a lot of guys that steal potatoes, watermelons, cabbage.

Have you?

Oh, yeah. You know, it's a hard thing to run with a watermelon [laughs]. It's a hard job. You just cannot run with a watermelon. You ever try to run with two watermelons? Goddamn, it's a hard job [laughs]. Try it one day. Them watermelons jiggle, and you're tryin' to adjust 'em. . . . It's hard [laughs].

I haven't had to steal much food. My grandfather always raises a garden, and I do a lot of fishing. Blacks around here eat a lot of fish, so when I don't have anything to do, I go fishing. I've sold fish, too. Sold a great deal of fish. Mostly buffaloes and a few bass. Had regular customers. All these schoolteachers want fish. And the farmer's market, I've even sold at the market. I got caught once. Well, I didn't get caught, but somebody turned me in to the game warden. Told him I was catchin' game fish. He showed up one day and told me he had to come out and check on it. It was a good thing I didn't have any game fish that time. All of 'em was legal fish. He told me that if I had just one bass it could've cost me \$150. Didn't make any difference how long it was, it would've cost me \$150. From then on I had to be more careful.

I used to fish down by the river. That's where I went to catch the bass anyway. Boy, if the game warden only could've seen 'em [laughs]. I did that about seven months, and I'd pick up anywhere from \$4 to \$6 a day. You string out your net, and about fifty yards away you string out another one. You might let 'em sit there all night. And when the fish runs into the net, he gets tangled. The next morning you go back and take him out.

But I had to go out of business. A lot of guys was stealin' my nets. They wanted to try and make that little extra change, too. Times are hard, man. Shoot. These guys wanted some money in their pocket, and they would watch you. They might be out settin' traps or somethin', and they would watch when you put your nets in the lake. Shoot, when you leave, they go right back in there and take it. Might set it again right around the corner from where you had it. So I would make something

like \$5 or \$6 a day, and the nets was costin' me \$30. I was tryin' to save to buy another net. If I could get one, then I could make a little more money. I was tryin' to establish myself to where I might have six or seven nets. Shoot, I couldn't win. 'Cause the more I'd buy, the more they'd steal, and I found myself workin' for nothin'.

Now I pick up Coke bottles. You can get five cents apiece for coke bottles. A guy made me see that when I was in Texas. He said, "Would you take a nickel and throw it out of your pocket?" I said no. He said, "That bottle you just kicked there is a nickel." I began to realize what he meant about that. If I kick one bottle and kick another one, that's a dime. And it goes on up. As easy as I can kick it, I can pick it up. So that's what I do. If you find ten bottles, that's 50 cents. A pack of cigarettes. So if I run across a bottle and I need some money, I pick it up. I don't go around town lookin', but you get guys to do that. They make sort of like a wheelbarrow and go down by the highway, pickin' up bottles.

Then we have a lot of races. Races for a fifth of wine. Races for \$1. All kinds of other games. Drinking contests. Domino games. I don't take part in the drinkin' games, but I play dominoes. You can't imagine how time passes when you're playin' dominoes. I think it's an education. Teaches you to be quick.

Anything that comes up, I'll try to make a little money. Like my father used to mess around with plumbing, and he taught me when I was a boy. If somebody needs a pipe put in or a leak fixed, maybe I'll do it and charge 'em \$2 or \$3, where a plumber would charge 'em \$20 an hour. Or I work haulin' hay. They pay a penny a bale. Five hundred bales, that's \$5. It's hard work. One of them bales weighs 100, 150 pounds, and you're throwin' 500 bales and then have to get in that barn and stack it, too. Wow, that's a hard job of work for \$5, I'll tell you.

And I've picked cotton. That hasn't started yet this year. It'll start around the middle of next month. It used to pay \$2 a hundredweight, and some days you might not even pick one hundred pounds. That was when I was younger. If you never picked before in your whole life, you might not make but \$1 a day, or 75 cents. You got to be a fast and strong picker to make \$4. You ever seen a cotton row? A cotton row is about a mile long. You have to drag that sack through there, pickin' cotton. The sun's beatin' down, and the poison they put on the cotton makes your nose itch and sneeze. Then, once you get the sack down the row, you have to pull it down to the other end to weigh it. It's hard work. You have to pick a lot of cotton to get one hundred pounds.

But when the season comes, if I don't have work, I'm gonna be out there pickin' cotton. The pay's gone up a little bit now. Lots of the guys will be out there 'cause it's the only thing people get to do around here. I swear to God, even at \$4 a day, I'll be doin' it. It gives you somethin' for your mind to do.

EDDIE VARGAS

He lives in the Chicano ghetto of Los Angeles. He grew up in the streets, a gang member from an early age. "Then I met Dorothy, my wife. She was different. Other girls I just picked up to throw away, picked up to throw away. But I seen something different in her. She started talking to me, changing my ways. Even though I came from a Christian family, I was still bad. So it's not inherited. I listened to her and started changin'. I went from an F to a B average student."

He is twenty-four and has a child of school age. A visitor to his living room soon notices a huge aquarium against one wall and a dog-eared Bible, the only item on the coffee table. He is a recent convert to fundamentalist religion, describing his past with the phrase, "When I was in the world. . . ."



When I graduated from high school, I got a scholarship to go to college. They knew I came from a Mexican background, so they wanted to help me. I went to a technical college for two years. I was taking a full load and working nights. It was a real ambitious time for me. I was thinking, "Wow, I'm going to college." I graduated after two years with something like seventy units and my qualification in machine shop work. After I graduated, I got married, and then I went to another school for more training, to finish my apprenticeship program. When I did that, I thought I really had it made. I figured, "Wow, I graduated, I had a good average, I've got my apprenticeship credentials." I thought I had a lot behind me. Then I went out there in the streets and started looking for a job. That's where I started getting hurt.

The first place I got work was at Fudd Engineering Associates. They told me, "We can only start you out at \$3 an hour." Well, one of my teachers in school used to tell me, "Never settle for anything small. Always aim high." That's what he got into my head: Always aim high. So I told them I wanted more than \$3. I was aiming high. But he said, "I'll start you off at \$3 and see how you are." I finally said OK. I started doing machine shop work, and there was one job I didn't thread right. He told me, "I gotta lay you off."

Then I went to another company. They wanted to pay me \$3 an hour, too, and I said no. I was still aiming high. So I lost out on that job, and

the same thing happened at another place. I lost out on two jobs. I was asking for \$3.50 an hour and they wouldn't pay it.

Then later on it started getting rough, and I had to settle for whatever I could get. I'd be looking for a job, and they'd be telling me they need ten years' experience or five years' experience. I told them, "Look, I don't have the experience. I have the knowledge and the know-how on up-to-date machines. I got my tools. I know what to do." They'd say, "I'm sorry." So after looking all over the place I got kind of disgusted. Everybody wanted ten years' experience, and I was twenty years old [laughs]. Finally I came to a company called Winston Corp. They wanted ten or fifteen years' experience. I was so disgusted and run down by this point that I said, "Give me any job." So I started working on the assembly line. I did that for three years. I put aside my knowledge and my skill because I had to work. I had a little girl, and I had to feed her.

After three years they closed down and went back east, so I got laid off again. Then I started working for another company driving a forklift. After a while they put me on cutting metals, and then I started running the machines. The lathes and mills. It was machine shop work, the first I'd had since I got out of school. I was pretty happy with it. For a while there was a lot of work. But then the work went down, and they laid me off for two weeks. They called me back because there was work again. I worked a week. They laid me off again. And now I've been off for eight months. I'm looking for a job, but not in machine shop. I figure I'll go back into shipping and receiving. Working with the trucks. Plain labor work, in other words. Because I have some experience in shipping and receiving. And I've been looking at the unemployment office for whatever odds-and-ends type jobs they have. One was for a chauffeur, chauffeuring coffins. A hearse driver. That was \$3.50 to \$3.75 an hour, but I didn't get it. The problem is always experience. I have a friend, he's Mexican, too, who went for a job sweeping floors. And you know what they told him? He had to have two years' experience. Two years' experience in sweeping floors for \$2.30 an hour! He said, "You guys are crazy. Two years' experience? I sweep floors in my house every day! There's nothing to it!" [Laughs.] So that's the situation I'm in right now.

It gets to me. There are times when I cry about it. I knew it was gonna be hard, but I wasn't expecting it to be this hard. But this is where the Lord comes in. See, I came to the Lord just before I got laid off. If I was still in the world now, I think I would be going crazy. Hollering, nervous, upsetting my family. Hating everything like I did when I was in high school. But there's a Scripture that says, "I am in the world, but I am not of the world." People can't understand that. It's what's keeping me sane right now. Because to me the Lord is the truth. He's the one I'm living for. I believe in God, and He is true in my life. I had a personal

experience with Him, and I know that the word of God says that if you have heavy burdens or heavy labors, put your cares upon Him. So I have been trusting the Lord to supply me with a job. The Scripture says, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all his righteousness shall be added onto you." As long as I put Christ first in the picture, I know He is going to supply my needs. And He does in different ways. Two days ago somebody gave us some food. My mother-in-law gave us \$50. People help out here and there, but I know it's the Lord doing it.

So I feel that if I get a job, I get a job. If I don't, I don't. I just keep on looking. Simple as that. I'm not gonna quit and say, "Forget it. I'm no good. I'm not worthy. I'm not a good father. I can't support my family. My kid don't want me, and my wife don't want me." I don't have that attitude because I know my wife has confidence in me and the Lord is going to keep us. It still bothers me about the job, but I have Christ in my heart. I've got something to base my life on. I live not for material stuff or the desires of the flesh, but for Christ. I owe Him my life, because I know He did a miracle for me. I'm a completely different person than what I used to be before. Completely different. If you would've met me before, I probably would be cussing and telling you to get out of here. I'm a new creature in Christ.

In fact, I wasn't looking very hard for a job until about two months ago because I was working for the church. We have a program called Street Line. We work with gang members and drug addicts. I go into the ghettos and tell those guys that they don't have to live that way, fighting with each other, in fear every time they turn around, getting hooked on heroin. I tell them that Jesus is the answer and He is the way. See, there are a lot of organizations trying to get these guys—social services and group therapy and such—but they don't have the answer. Christ has the answer. So when I first lost my job, I was working full time for Street Line. Then I had to slow down because my unemployment is running out, so I have to get a job. I can't be at the church so much.

I enjoyed that work. It wasn't a job like unloading freight. It was a job that dealt with human beings. It was a responsibility job. I like to work with people. I can feel their burdens. I get a satisfaction when I talk to them, and witness to them, and see a different glow in their faces. I rejoice when I see a person convert themselves out of that rotten life they're living. And it's not easy. It's not an easy thing to go into the ghettos and talk to these guys. Some of them . . . *están locos*, they're crazy. But there are a lot of them that put up a mask. And we know they put up a mask. Inside, they're crying, crying for help. So you go and explain to them that you came from a rough life, and you know what they're going through. You explain to them with love. And they open up.

It helped me another way, too. I started out feeling bad because I don't

have a job. But some guys out there don't get anything to eat. There are people out there who are crippled. They're suffering more than I have ever suffered. I saw people on skid row. Man, I thought my life was rough. They've got a rougher life, living out there in the cold. Or a heroin addict going around in the middle of the night, making connections, stealing, and getting killed. So I say to myself, "You know what? You ought to be happy with what you have. You have a family together; you have a home; you're surviving. You're not rich. You're poor, but you're not on the ground." I praise God that I can think and talk and move around. I can go out for a job, and either I get it or I don't get it. I still make my effort.

But the time's gonna come soon when my unemployment runs out and I'll have to take any job for any money. See, a man has a lot of pride, but the Lord has been taking my pride away. When there's no money left and I'm not getting any money, I'm gonna accept a job for \$2 or \$2.50 an hour. I got no choice. It's either life or death, and I'd rather take life. I'm not like Jack Benny, you know: "Your money or your life!" "Take my life!" [Laughs.] When the time comes, I'll automatically have to take that job. And then by some miracle, maybe I'll advance in it. Right now I won't accept \$2.50 an hour. Three dollars, yes, but not \$2.50. Even though it's only 50 cents' difference, it adds up.

I'm very discouraged at this point. I mean, I'm not gonna get any worse. I live day by day. I'm not gonna worry about what happens tomorrow. But there are times when I feel, "Man, I can't go on living like this." I'm only human. There are times of doubt, when I get hate into me. I feel like they're not giving me a chance. I start turning against the society. And there's times when I feel like I'm not worth anything. Sometimes I think it's all my fault. I should have opened my mouth at such-and-such a time. I should have taken such-and-such a job when I had the chance. I shouldn't have listened to that teacher when he told me to aim high. Because I don't care for that idea no more, that "aim high" thing. I feel that if you can get a job that's reasonable, take it. Don't be greedy. Don't be selfish and want more and more and more because all you're gonna do is lose everything. Take what they offer you, and start from there. You'll start moving up. But "aim high," it's no good no more. I just hope that teacher's not still teaching his students those things.

Sometimes I cry when I think about all that. How come I didn't take advantage when it was there? There were times when I had it in my hand and turned it down. Now if they offer me a job for \$3 an hour, I'm gonna take it. Regardless of what the job is. I'm not gonna make that mistake again. I know I can't make it on \$2.50. That's not a mistake, me turning that down. But if I turn down a job for \$3 again, that's a mistake. So when I pray at night, I pray I don't make a mistake like that again. Take it! Three dollars an hour, take it!

MAHMOUD DAUD

He is Lebanese, a member of the Arab community clustered on the southern edges of Detroit. It is midafternoon when I come to the door of his house, on a leafy street, but he has just gotten out of bed. He is dark-skinned, handsome, shirtless, with wild black hair. As we talk, different members of the family come into the room to be introduced. His mother serves thick, sweet coffee; she has tiny tattoos on the back of each hand. Afterward they insist I stay for dinner and feed me quantities of zucchini stuffed with ground meat and pine nuts.

He talks in heavily accented English, with a kind of passionate despair. Seven thousand miles away a catastrophic civil war is raging in his country. Half a mile away is the mammoth River Rouge Plant of the Ford Motor Company—a Mecca to which he cannot gain entry.



I was born in Lebanon. I came here around six and a half years ago. When I was fifteen. Now I'm twenty-one. Trying to find a job. In six years I had one job. I worked at Frank's Pizza for one year. When I first came here, I was new. I didn't know how to drive. So I started learning how to drive. I drove the car and the truck for Frank's. I used to get lost. Then after one month, two months, I knew the streets. I went around delivering. But then they gave me another job. See they don't want me no more, right? They want to get rid of me. How they gonna do it? They don't want to tell me, "You're fired. We don't want you." They say, "We're gonna give you a job inside the place." So I went on the inside job. Worked a week. My check came around, and it said \$80. On the truck I was making \$150. After they take taxes, \$107. So I know they don't want me anymore. I don't know why. They just don't want. So I says, "No, I'm not gonna work no more. I quit." Since that day I'm looking for a job.

We got fifteen people in this house. Eight of them, they're still under age. And my father is the only one working. He's working at Chrysler. Me, I'm just trying to find a job to give him money. I go to all my friends and other people, and I ask them. Every time I ask they say they don't need people at their factory. Or they say this other factory is needing people. So I go there, and they say, "No, this factory is laying off people. What's your name?" "Mahmoud." And that's it. When they know my name's Mahmoud, they say, "We can't help you, no."

Because you're an Arab?

I don't know. Maybe. Also lack of experience. And I don't talk good English. I talk English but I don't talk it good. And I don't have experience in this kind of work, in a factory or inside to be a manager.

You see this drum? I play it. This is the only thing I learned here. I came here and there was nothing to do. I used to play tambourine in the old country. Then I came here. I said, "Well, I got a drum, so I'll make some money out of it." I started it. Now I make some money. I play at weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, conventions, anything. Sometimes they pay you \$75 a night. At nightclubs, \$30. That's why I didn't go to work yet. This is better than working in a gas station or a store. In a gas station I'm gonna make \$75 a week. That's why if I work in a factory, I don't care about this drumming job no more. If I find a better job, like \$3 an hour, then I'll leave the drums. But this is more money than a gas station. I didn't find a job yet that pays me more than this.

How do you get through the day?

Well, I don't have a job, right? So what I'm gonna do? I go look for a job, yes. But all the time I sleep, wake up, watch TV, sleep, wake up, watch TV, sleep, wake up, watch TV. Every day I sleep twelve, fifteen hours. I can't just go outside because I don't have the money. Sometimes I even scream at my mother 'cause I feel sick inside. When anybody talks to me, I swear at them. I don't want nobody to talk to me. Sometimes I sit by myself for twenty-four hours a day. I get up, watch TV for twenty-four hours a day, believe me. Around two months ago I stayed in the house one whole week. I didn't go outside. One week watching TV. Because of the job. The job, that's the only thing to bother me. Give me a job and believe me, you'll see me different.

I get so nervous sometimes, I lose my mind. I don't know what to do. I go outside looking for people to fight. I don't mean I look to fight them. But I go outside and I'm so nervous that if somebody talks to me, I fight them. And I don't want to do bad things. Like go steal or kill or something like this. I don't like it. I could do it. It's easy. But I know I'm probably gonna lose everything by doing that. But if I'm gonna need it, I'm gonna do it. You know what I mean. I hope not, but if I need it I'm gonna do it. I don't care what's gonna happen. Sometimes it comes in my mind: "What the hell, I'm not working. I don't have any money, and I can't work, and I can't make no money. So which is the easiest way?"

That's why a lot of people take drugs. So they can forget. I tried it once or twice. I took some hash. It was the first time in my life I took hash. I came over to the house and everything started going dark. My father and mother, they say, "What's wrong?" They got scared. I didn't

tell them. I says, "Everybody stay out of my sight 'cause I don't know what I'm gonna do. Just call the ambulance and let me go to the hospital." I called my brother, and he came and said, "What's wrong? Did you take any drugs?" I says, "Yeah, I took some drugs." He says, "That was wrong." I went to the hospital, took a shot, slept and slept. Since that day I never touch it. I lost my mind the last time, right? Maybe the second time or the next time, when you want something and you wanna get it so bad and you don't know how, you're gonna take some drugs and go get it. Whatever you want, and whichever way you wanna get it. See, I don't want to be a bad guy. I still want to be straight. But if it's gonna be my life, or my brother or my mother or a friend's life, somebody's gonna be sorry. I think it's me.

See, whatever you want to do, money will let you do it. If you want to be a king, money will make you a king. A lot of people say money is nothing. Well, if you're living good, money is nothing. But it's because you have money that you're living good. Like me, I don't need a lot of money. With \$5,000 I could do something. For a lot of people here, Americans, \$5,000 is nothing to them. With \$5,000 they get a car. But I'm different. I got plans for \$5,000, because I know what the dollar means. I got plans for them when they come. Like to open something. My mother is a professional launderer. So with \$5,000 I could open a laundry. A small laundry, any place. Just a small corner. My mother could do it. When you start with something small, you get something big.

But I can't even get something small. And I feel so sorry for my father. I can't give him money. My father, he wants his family to be a big family. He wants to give from himself till he dies. That's what he is. He's been carrying me for six years. I worked one year and I gave to him. Now I play drums and I give him a little bit. But how much can I give him? Sometimes I don't get work. Then I'm gonna go to him and tell him I don't have money today. I need \$2 to get someplace. I'll tell you the truth, this is the only thing that's making me feel bad even more than jobs. When I ask him to give me a couple of dollars. He gives it to me. Just like a child.

Sometimes I get so hopeless I can't look for work no more. 'Cause you don't have to. Just look in the papers, you'll know what's going on. Believe me, this country has gone down 50 percent. Like I saw in a paper that there's 200,000 millionaires in this country. And the paper said, we don't want 200,000 millionaires. Instead, we could have 200 million people with a little bit of money. That's what it said in the paper. We need some money for the people. They're dying of hunger. Now in Lebanon, my country, they're dying of hunger. It's a revolution there. But revolution between the Christians and Moslems, between leftist and rightist, between Americans and Russians. Nobody knows

what's going on. A lot of people, they don't have money. They're gonna die 'cause there is nobody to help them. So what they're gonna do? They're gonna get a machine gun, go someplace, kill somebody, get his food. And it's gonna be in this country, too. Dying of hunger. That's what I think. Because I can see it now. It's gone down 50 percent. A lot of people are getting hungry. Over at the unemployment office I saw thousands of people. Remember the unemployment office where you were standing? There were people standing to the other side of the street. Standing up everywhere. And what they gonna get? Ninety dollars a week? What's that gonna do, \$90 a week?

My brother, you know, he works in a meat shipping plant. You know how cold it is where he works? Forty-five degrees. And he's standing on his legs for eight hours. How long is his break? Fifteen minutes. He works like a slave. And he can't bring his family from Lebanon. You know, sometimes my brother sits talking to God. He asks Him, "Why are you doing this to me? I'm gonna do this and that to you." He got so nervous, he don't even trust his God no more. Sometimes he says, "God, I don't believe in you." I don't believe there is a God. If there is a God, what is He doing right now? Why doesn't He see? Why doesn't He look at what's going on? A lot of people dying of hunger. Why don't He help even one guy?" You know, we have a joke. One guy says, "Jesus or Mohammed's coming back." You say, "He's coming back where? To the South End?" Where is He coming from? What's He gonna look for? I think if He comes here, He's not gonna find a job. He's gonna go back up there." Believe me. Day after day you lose your trust in God. Not just in God, in yourself, too.

Once I stayed over by an auto plant for two months. Waiting for a job. Can you believe it? Do you know how long is two months? When it's freezing below zero? That's why maybe I hate everybody. They hire like a hundred blacks, twenty-five whites, one Arab. Believe me. So I stayed there in line. I'm thinking maybe they didn't get enough Arabs. I fill out the application and give it to the guy. He takes it and says, "Come back some other time." He don't tell you, "We're sorry," or something. Just "Come back some other time. Get out of here." Second day, third day, fourth day. I stayed there two months. Then I got so nervous, I want to kill that guy. One day a Palestinian guy gets in there. He's tall, smart, strong. He stayed in line just like me. He gave the guy the application. The guy didn't look at it. He took it from him and said, "What's your name?" "Ali." "Oh, Ali. Come back some other time." So that guy Ali, he got nervous. He held him by the neck right there and took his tooth out with his fist. He says, "I don't want your job. I just want your . . .

*The Arab neighborhood on the outskirts of Detroit.

when I give you this paper . . . I don't want you to hire me. When you take this paper, just look at it and say you're sorry. Or don't say you're sorry. Just look at it and say, 'We don't have a job for you.' Don't tell me to come back tomorrow. It's below zero and the ice is on the sidewalks."

You know what I used to do? I used to take my blankets from the house and put them over me to go wait in line. 'Cause it's too cold, man. It's below zero. You wear five or six jackets, two pairs of pants, something under the pants. Do you know what it is when it's below zero, to stand outside six hours? Sometimes I would go there at 2:00 A.M. till 8:30 or 9:00. I used to sleep outside. Sometimes you take newspaper or something and put it on the ground and sleep on it. 'Cause if you come at six you find at least forty people standing in line, and they only take five guys. So I used to say, "Well, I'll go first. Maybe they'll take me because I'm first." I used to go around at two and find some people sleeping before me. It's two, man. And I knew they were hiring. I filled out applications for about fifteen people, and they got in for interviews. I filled out applications for three blacks who didn't know how to even read and write, except their names or something. They got inside; I didn't. I don't know why. There's nothing between me and the guy who's sitting there. I never met him in my life. It's unbelievable. Ask anybody on the South End. They'll tell you. It's true what I'm saying.

My father was lucky. He came to this country. He's got fifteen people to support. I don't know what happened. He went into Chrysler just like that, and he's working there now. But I'm twenty-one years old, right? Who do you think is gonna work better than me? An old man? I could work twenty-four hours a day, but they don't even think of it, those people. It's like you're trying to fight a war. And that's not just my opinion. You could go to the South End and just watch those people there. It's almost all Arabs. A lot of them don't have experience, but a lot of them do have experience. And they're smart. Believe me, there's a lot of smart people there, but they haven't found a job. If they have got a job, they work like slaves. Not like workers, like slaves. 'Cause they don't know how to speak the language. They get the bad jobs. Work and work and work and work, and they're gonna die, man. But I'm gonna do it, too. If it comes to me, I'm gonna do the same thing. I'm gonna be a slave. That's all there is. But I'm gonna be a slave because maybe if I'm a slave, then my brother, the small one who's five years old, when he gets to be eighteen, he won't be a slave. You know what I mean? That's all my father's doing. My father is working as a slave for Chrysler. He supports us so we won't be slaves.