

# Hole in my Life

By Jack Gantos

The prisoner in the photograph is me. The ID number is mine. The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was twenty-one years old and had been locked up for a year already— the bleakest year of my life— and I had more time ahead of me. At the time this picture was taken I weighed 125 pounds. When I look at my face in the photo I see nothing but the pocked mask I was hiding behind. I parted my hair down the middle and grew a mustache in order to look older and tougher, and with the greasy prison diet (salted chicken gizzards in a larded gravy, chicken wings with oily cheese sauce, deep-fried chicken necks), and the stress, and the troubled dreams of capture and release, there was no controlling the acne. I was overmatched. I might have been slight— but I was smart and cagey. I managed to avoid a lot of trouble because I knew how to blend in and generally sift through the days unnoticed by men who spent the majority of their time looking to inflict pain on others. I called these men “skulls” and they were freaks for violence.

Here we were, all of us living in constant, pissy misery, and instead of trying to feel more human, more free and unchained in their hearts by simply respecting one another and getting along, many of the men found cruel and menacing ways to make each day a walk through a tunnel of fear for others. Fear of being a target of irrational violence haunted me day and night. The constant tempo of that violence pulsed throughout my body and made me feel small, and weak, and cowardly. But no matter how big you were, there was no preventing the brutality. I had seen the results of violence so often— with guys hauling off and smashing someone’s face with their fists or with a metal tool, a baseball bat, a rock— and all for no other reason than some imagined offense or to establish a reputation for savagery.

When I lived and worked in the prison hospital— especially after I had become the X-ray technician— I was part of an emergency medical response team. I was called on day and night to X-ray all types of ugly wounds to see if the bones behind the bruised or bleeding flesh had been cracked, chipped, or broken. As we examined them, the patients would be telling the guards, “I didn’t even know the guy” or (my greatest fear) “I never heard ’em, never saw ‘em.” It was this lottery of violence that haunted me. Your number could come up anywhere, anytime— in the dark of night while you slept in a dormitory with a hundred other men, or in full daylight on the exercise field while you strolled in the sun. Once, in the cafeteria line, standing directly next to a guard, I watched a skinny black kid stab some other “blood” with a dinner

fork. He drove it into the guy's collarbone so deep the doctor had to remove it with a pair of surgical pliers. AIDS wasn't a factor then. The blood that sprayed over the food trays was wiped off by the line workers and they kept spooning up our chow.

I wasn't raised around this level of violence. I wasn't prepared for it, and I've never forgotten it. Even now, when walking some of Boston's meaner streets, I find myself moving like a knife, carving my way around people, cutting myself out of their picture and leaving nothing of myself behind but a hole. Like most kids, I was aware that the world was filled with dangerous people, yet I wasn't certain I could always spot them coming. My dad, however, was a deadeye when it came to spotting the outlaw class. He had never been in prison, but he always seemed to know who had spent time in the "big house" or who was headed down that path. In his own way he tried to warn me about going in their direction.

When I was young, he would drive the family from Florida back to our hometown in western Pennsylvania to visit relatives. Once there, he'd troll the streets with me in our big Buick and point to guys he knew and tell me something wicked, or weird, or secret about them. "He killed a man with a pitchfork," Dad would say, nodding slyly toward some hulking farmer in bib overalls. "Look at his hands. He's a strong SOB— could strangle the life out of a cow." Or Dad would point to a woman. "She had a kid when she was in ninth grade and sold it to a neighbor." He knew it all. "He burned down a barn. He shot a cop. He robbed a bank."

Dad went on and on. I was always surprised at how many people from such a small town had been in prison. And I was really surprised that after committing such despicable acts they were back out on the street. They were a scary-looking lot, misshapen, studded with warts and moles, and I was glad we were in the car.

But not for long. He'd take me to the Elks Club, or the Am-Vets hall, or Hecla Gun Club in order to get up close and personal with some of the criminal class. He'd order a beer and get me a Coke and some sort of food treat that came out of a gallon pickle jar of beet-red vinegar— a hardboiled egg, or a swatch of pig's skin, or a hunk of kielbasa. Everything smelled like a biology specimen, and with the first bite the red juice spurted out and ran down my chin. I must have looked like I'd split my lip in a bar brawl. Then, once we were settled, Dad would continue to point out the criminals, all the while using his Irish whisper, which could be heard in the next town over. He pointed out bank robbers, church robbers, car thieves, and a shadowy "second floor" man, known for snatching jewelry from the bedrooms of sleeping homeowners. I began to imagine the entire town was some sort of bizarre experimental prison camp without walls— a punishment center where criminals were sentenced to living only with other criminals. Dad snapped his fingers. "These folks zigged when the rest of the world zagged. And once you cross that line, there's no coming back. Mark my words." All this was my father's way of letting me know he was in the know— he had the dirt on everyone, and it was the dirt that made them interesting. At the same time he

made it clear they were damaged goods and could never come clean again.

Dad's keen eye for spotting criminals of all stripes was impressive. But it wasn't perfect. He never had me pegged for being one of them. Ironically, in spite of all the fear and remorse and self-loathing, being locked up in prison is where I fully realized I had to change my life for the better, and in one significant way I did. It is where I went from thinking about becoming a writer, to writing. I began to write stories— secret stories about myself and the restless men around me. While among them, I may have feigned disinterest, but like my father I watched them closely and listened whenever they spoke. Then back in my cell I would sit on the edge of my bunk with my journal spread open across my knees and try to capture their stories with my own words.

For some paranoid reason the warden would not allow us to keep journals. He probably didn't want the level of violence and sex among both prisoners and guards to be documented. My secret journal was an old hardback copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, in which I spent hours writing in a tiny script between the tightly printed lines. I kept the book like a Gideons' Bible on top of my locker and, as far as I know, its true purpose was never discovered.

Someone once said anyone can be great under rosy circumstances, but the true test of character is measured by how

well a person makes decisions during difficult times. I certainly believe this to be true. I made a lot of mistakes, and went to jail, but I wasn't on the road to ruin like everybody said. While I was locked up, I pulled myself together and made some good decisions. Like any book about mistakes and redemption (Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* is my favorite), the mistakes are far more interesting to read about (and write about)— so I'll start with where I think I went around the bend.

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I was nineteen, still stuck in high school, and I wasn't living at home. I had unlimited freedom. No supervision whatsoever. I had spending money. I had a fast car. I had a fake ID. My entire year was a grand balancing act between doing what I wanted and doing what I should, and being who I was while inventing who I wanted to be: a writer with something important to say. During my junior year my parents had moved the family from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to San Juan, Puerto Rico. My dad, who had a lifelong habit of switching jobs almost every year, took a position as a construction superintendent rebuilding a beachfront hotel and casino. My mom and my older sister were all for it; my younger brothers were ready to live like surfer boys. It sounded like a big party to me. I turned in my books, packed my bags, and said farewell to my few friends and teachers at Sunrise High School without shedding a tear. Since I had already gone to nine different

schools, I was skilled at being a professional acquaintance. I didn't have a problem with saying good-bye to old friends and walking away forever.

On the plane down to Puerto Rico I figured I'd never see them again, and I'm sure they thought the same of me. New friends were always around the corner. I didn't speak Spanish so I couldn't go to the public schools in San Juan, and since my parents didn't have the money for private school we decided it would be best for me to just go to work. My dad fixed me up with the electrical subcontractor on his construction project, and right away I found myself wiring hotel rooms. The money was good. Half of the existing hotel was shut down while we added two new floors. A lot of the workers were from the States and one of the perks of the job was that they were given hotel rooms to live in. I was, too. This was ideal. I had privacy. I had my own TV. I even had maid service— didn't have to make a bed or pick a wet towel off the floor for half a year. Plus, my parents lived in an apartment a block away. Each evening after I showered in my hotel room, I would carry my dirty laundry down the street where I joined the family for dinner. Afterward, I'd go back to the hotel with clean laundry and play cards with the other electrical workers who lived down the hall. They were nice older guys who flew in from Miami every week to make fast money working double shifts. They let me drink a little, but not too much. And they let me lose a little, but not too much.

On the weekends they'd fly home and I'd drink a little too much and wander around the tourist zones. I'd go to the casinos at the El San Juan and Americana. I'd imagine I was James Bond meeting beautiful older women at the roulette tables and walking arm in arm up to their rooms where something dangerously exotic might happen. But the only arm I managed to warm up was on the slot machines. I loved playing them. The flashing lights and the sound of the gears spinning and the wild thrill of the jingling coins pouring into the metal pay-tray and the waitresses dressed in skimpy outfits bringing me free drinks for good tips was a blast. And if I lost too much I'd hop up and walk for an hour down the beach and look out at the stars and listen to the surf and inhale the whole world's briny smell rising from the ocean I loved. Then it never felt as if I had lost. And once, I had won so much I stood on the beach in the moonlight skipping silver quarters across the calm water as the little waves pawed the shore.

But after a while, I began to think of school again. Besides, I knew nothing about electricity and nearly electrocuted myself several times. After I had melted my third pair of Klein sidecutters and scorched a number of body parts while working on live wires, I admitted that electrical work was not in my future and I made the decision to get my high school diploma. After six months on the job I had saved enough money to afford a private school. But I couldn't get in. My grades had always been mediocre, and given that I had never finished eleventh grade, the private schools in San Juan wouldn't accept me as a senior. The thought of repeating

eleventh grade was too depressing. I talked to my parents and they arranged for me to return to my cast-off school back in Florida and live with a family who had an extra room. My parents thought this was the best opportunity for me. I had my savings and had never been much trouble, so they must have reasoned it was an opportunity for me to spread my wings and make something of myself. I packed my bags, said good-bye to my family, and returned to Fort Lauderdale.

When I reenrolled as a senior at Sunrise High, no one asked about the second half of my junior year, and I didn't volunteer any information. It turned out that the people my dad arranged for me to live with— the Bacon family— were desperate for extra cash. My dad had met Fred Bacon while at an Elks Club benefit to help needy kids. The Bacons had purchased a new house with a swimming pool, had two new cars, and were raising two preschool kids, all on an income selling mail-order prosthetic limbs out of their garage— which looked like a morgue of plastic parts. Mr. and Mrs. Bacon had limb disabilities themselves— he with a missing arm and she without a left foot— and so were well suited for their business.

“Can't make a dime,” Mr. Bacon said one night after a few beers. He yanked off his flexible rubber arm and waved it overhead like a giant bug antenna. “All these old people come down here with prosthetics that look like something whittled out of a baseball bat. You'd think they would want something snazzy-looking. But

no. They're just happy to be alive. In the meantime, we're starving."

So my rental money was welcome. Plus, with my new grocery store job at Winn-Dixie I was always bringing home bags full of dented cans, crushed boxes of cereal, half-open packages of dried beans and rice, and frozen food with freezer burn. The Bacon family didn't mind the misfit food, but soon they found out I was the greater misfit. It took them about six weeks to realize I was a live-in party crasher. After having my own hotel room in San Juan, I wasn't ready to live with other people. I'd go out drinking with my friend Will Doyle, and afterward I'd come home late and play my stereo at full volume, smell up the house with cigarette smoke, and make long distance phone calls on the Bacons' bill. I kept drinking more and more until I discovered I could drink lots of beer. Nearly a case of it in a sitting. Unfortunately I was also in the process of discovering I had no tolerance for that much alcohol and I always became blind drunk and ferociously ill, spending almost every night loudly heaving my guts out in the toilet while begging God for mercy. I was a mess.

After one especially robust night of drinking with Will, I stumbled home, crawled up the sidewalk, stabbed my key in the front door, let myself in, and power barfed all over the living room. After I sloshed blindly through that mess on all fours, I splattered the bathroom, my bedroom, the bathroom again, my bedroom again, until I passed out in the bathroom with my arms draped around the toilet and my head on the cool rim of the bowl. When I

came to the next afternoon, after the carpet cleaners had finished their work, I was summoned into the kitchen, which had been closed off with plastic sheeting and heavily sprayed with institutional-strength air freshener. I was promptly informed that I had to pack my bags and be out of their lives in an hour. Mr. Bacon tapped on the face of his watch— with his flexible prosthetic finger— to show that he meant business.

I didn't debate their judgment of me as "an immature, spoiled brat who needed a major butt-kicking in order to straighten up." I didn't have time to defend myself. I suddenly felt sick all over again. "Excuse me," I belched, and quickly covered my mouth with both hands, nodded my agreement to their assessment of my character, and ran down the hall to the bathroom.

Mrs. Bacon limped behind me yelling, "Don't you dare soil my carpet again!" I didn't. But I threw up something so harshly acidic it left me with canker sores on the inside of my mouth. As I stumbled out of the house, Mr. Bacon hollered out one final warning: "Keep this up and you'll fall flat on your ass." I spit up on the grass.

I spent the night in my car, parked next to the Dumpster behind the grocery store.

