

I love New York

Everyone in prison has a story about how they were caught, Sitting on the edge of a man's bunk while telling and listening to stories about how people got busted is about the same as being in the Boy Scouts and sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories. Being scared together created a great bond among boys, and being scared of each other created a great bond in prison. Most of the time individuality was measured by how violent you could be, and this kept everyone on edge. But what we all had in common, and what everyone liked to share, is how we got caught.

I loved those getting-caught stories, and they were among the first ones I wrote down in my secret prison journal. They had what every story should have: action running like a fleeing suspect across the surface shadowed step for step by big risks and big emotions. Of course they always ended about the same. Guys either turned themselves in, were taken by surprise, or were taken by force. But every one of them felt it differently, and did their time their own way— everything from “hard” time to “standing on their head.”

Since about half of the guys in prison were in for bank robbery, I heard a lot of their stories. I met an ex-Green Beret who robbed banks. He was running around with another man's wife and she got tired of him. So to get rid of him she had him rob a string of banks and hide the money with her. Then she called the FBI and turned him in. There was a Chinese man who didn't speak much English and couldn't read it. He was in for bank robbery, too. His

claim was that he was waiting for a bus when a man pulled up in a car and offered him twenty bucks to run into the corner bank and hand a teller a note, then return with the package. He did what he was told. It was a stick-up note. The teller gave the Chinese guy a bag of cash, he gave it to the guy in the car, and soon after he was arrested while still waiting for his bus. One guy claimed he was narcoleptic. He handed the teller the stick-up note, and then became so tense he passed out and woke up in custody. And then there were the usual ones— drug addicts who robbed banks to keep up their habits and were finally caught in the act. They didn't wear masks, they didn't even own cars, they didn't get but a few thousand dollars each time— they were just playing a game of cops and robbers until they were caught.

A lot of those guys had more friends and relatives in prison than out. Then there were the ones who shot bystanders and cops, their partner, or, by accident, themselves. A guy named Moon had dropped his gun and shot himself in the eye. I took his X-ray, and the .22 slug was clear as day in his frontal lobe. Another guy shot himself in the leg. The bone never healed properly. An infection spiked up and he was rushed to the emergency room downtown where a two-inch section of his tibia and fibula was removed.

Of course we had the usual list of guys in for car theft, pimping, mail theft, murder, manslaughter, assault, burglary, larceny, arson, explosives, drug possession, drug dealing. And me, in for smuggling.

This is how I got caught.

After our stopover in Cape May we came right up the New Jersey coast. By that evening I could see the lights shining brightly on the Statue of Liberty. She was like a lookout waving her arm and giving us the all-clear. Behind her, the skyscrapers of New York waited for us like a crowd held back, straining, ready to

pounce. But were they a crowd of buyers, or police? I stood on the bow and looked through the binoculars. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I can tell you the fear of waiting to get caught was worse than getting caught. Every boat I saw, every noise I heard, every helicopter that spanked through the air, every searchlight that spun its bright eye toward us made me jump.

Would the police be expecting us? Would they come at us with a police launch? Or would they just take their time and wait for us to start selling? I scanned the water, the coastline, and the air. I knew they were watching us. Still, there was nothing to do but go forward and hope that Rik had made arrangements to sell the hash.

“Are you worried?” Hamilton asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I'll be worried until it's all over.”

He laughed. “The police aren't that smart. My greatest fear is a snitch. That's always the weak link. The police are too stupid to catch you on their own. Every fat-assed bobby in the world depends on his snitch to do the dirty work.”

I wasn't in the mood to hear it. I was creeped out of my skin and waiting for a cop to reach up over the stern and yell, “Gotcha!” I returned to the bow and put on a life vest. I was a strong swimmer. I figured I could dive overboard and make my way to Miss Liberty. I raised my binoculars to my eyes. If the cops were coming, I wanted to see them first.

Since we hadn't hooked up with Rik, we didn't have a dock space reserved for us. Hamilton figured we'd just cruise around until we found something that looked available, but as it grew darker it was difficult to spot any marina space. We went up the oil-slicked East River, under the Brooklyn Bridge and along the east side of Manhattan. Along the way sailors waved to us. I

thought they had seen the British Union Jack and were friendly. In return, Hamilton gave them his royal wave as if he were the queen of England, and I waved as if I were riding a homecoming float. What I didn't know is that the East River was closed to pleasure craft traffic, which is why we were being waved away. But no police launch pulled us over. We passed by La Guardia Airport, with the jets soaring above our heads and the hot breath of their engines rolling down over us.

We made it all the way up to Queens before spotting a lighted marina sign. Hamilton headed toward the orange bumpers at the end of the dock.

“Should I drop an anchor?” I asked, and prepared to throw one over to slow us down.

“No,” he ordered. “Just take a line and jump on the dock and catch a cleat.”

As the boat evened up with the end of the dock I jumped off and hooked a line around a cleat, but the wood was rotted and the cleat bolts ripped out of the dock. I tried to haul the boat around, but it was a losing cause and finally I had to drop the line before being pulled into the water.

“Bloody incompetent!” Hamilton cursed and drifted onward until the bowsprit speared a metal barge. The barge was empty, and from the blow it sounded as if our arrival to Flushing had been announced with a Chinese gong. It brought the marina manager out of his little shed. Hamilton reversed the engine and sputtered back to where I could leap aboard, grab the line, and leap back onto the dock, where I looped it around a solid piling head and pulled it snug.

We made arrangements to keep the boat there. It seemed pretty remote and we felt secure being so out of the way. We walked up the dark street to a pay phone and Hamilton called Rik. He was in his room and ready to start moving the hash. He had a car, and had set up a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound sale. That news cheered me up and I didn't feel so gloomy anymore. Maybe, I thought, all that sitting around on the boat was making me paranoid. Maybe I should just relax and go with the flow.

On the way back to the boat I went into a little store and bought a case of cold beer and some food. As soon as I popped a beer open I began to feel better. We had the boat tied up. We hadn't been caught on the way in. And now that the selling had begun, the money would be flowing. I'd be paid and on my way to picking a new college.

When we got back on board, Hamilton used an old bathroom scale to weigh out the kilos of hash. I packed them in the canvas bags. When Rik arrived, we threw the hash in the trunk and took off with Hamilton driving like a madman.

"Stick with the speed limit," Rik reminded him. "We don't want to get pulled over."

"Nonsense," Hamilton said. "I used to be a professional driver in Manchester. I know what to do."

"Hey, Rik," I butted in. "Did you get the crate okay?"

"Yeah," he said, unfolding a map. "No problem, except for getting the screws out."

I smiled. I had used extra-long ones.

We were heading for Woodstock, New York, about ninety miles away. There was a guy named Jerome who would meet us at some gas station and we'd follow him to his place in the woods.

Jerome was waiting for us in his psychedelic hippie van, which was decorated with Day-Glo Peter Max designs. He might as well have had a neon sign saying "We have drugs! Arrest Us Now!" He made me nervous. We followed him down a dirt road into the country and came to a small shingled house. There was something wrong with it. It was off center, like something out of a fairy tale. "Built it myself," Jerome said proudly, hooking his thumbs into the front of his jeans. He recited the Crooked Man nursery rhyme, and grinned. We all smiled politely. I thought he was retarded in some way. I figured a person could not invent himself into a "Crooked Jerome," but had to be born that way.

Jerome's money connection hadn't arrived and nobody knew why, especially Jerome. He made a few calls from his crooked wall phone and kept assuring us the guy was coming. "It's legit!" he said, and pulled nervously on his long black beard as if it were black taffy. "I swear. It's legit."

So we waited, and waited, and waited, until we thought the deal was crooked. But Jerome convinced us to spend the night. I was suspicious. His house was crooked, he might be, too. Maybe he was as crazed as Charlie Manson and would kill us in our sleep. I was getting paranoid— not about the drugs, but about the people who used the drugs.

In the middle of the night I woke up on the couch. It was pitch-black. I staggered across the uneven floor and caromed off the walls and furniture. I spotted a sliver of moon through a window. That was good enough for me. I climbed out and staggered off into the bushes until I figured I was lost and nobody could find me, even if they wanted to drive a twelve-inch knife

into my belly. I sat down against a tree and fell asleep. The next morning no one seemed to be out looking for me so I sneaked up on the house fully expecting to find a bloodbath. Instead, everyone was up and smoking hash for breakfast. I was tired of that. I smoked a cigarette and had a cup of coffee. Not long after, Jerome's friend arrived with the money and we were all relieved and happy as we counted out the cash.

On the way back to New York we got caught in a thunderstorm. The rain was blinding. The traffic slowed to a crawl. Hamilton kept checking the rearview mirror.

“What's up?” I asked.

“We're being followed,” he replied, and abruptly turned the wheel. We went off the road and slid into the grassy median. Already the rainwater had collected and we sped like a ski boat down the swale. I was frozen with panic. We couldn't see a thing but sheets of water rushing over us as if we were a sinking ship. I kept thinking we were going to hit a bridge abutment and flatten up like a smashed beer can. We wouldn't be arrested. We'd be buried.

“Slow down,” Rik said. “No one is following us.”

“Bloody hell if they aren't,” Hamilton spit back. “The same car that followed us up to Jerome's is behind us again. When we pulled into the gas station to meet Jerome yesterday, it pulled in behind us.”

“Why didn't you say something?” Rik asked.

“Didn't know if we were being tagged until just now,” he said.

Hamilton kept plowing through the water and when the rain lightened he veered up the side of the median and screeched back

onto the highway and kept going. “I think we lost them,” he said, and smiled thinly as he patted his beard into shape.

“You’re paranoid,” Rik said. “There was nobody back there.”

“Bloody hell” is all Hamilton said then, and “Bloody hell,” he said more viciously when we returned to the marina. As soon as we parked the car the manager came running toward us.

“Just to let you know,” he said breathlessly, “during the storm your boat broke away from the dock. I was going to go pull it in, but before I could do so two men came up in a launch and boarded her. They tied her back up and I think they threw another anchor over, too. Were they friends of yours?”

At that moment I knew my fears were real. We were doomed. The extra anchor was in the fo’c’sle next to five hundred pounds of hash. Whoever got that anchor knew what we were doing. Something was up, and I could only think it would get worse. I started looking around the marina to see if I could spot the cops.

“Thanks,” Hamilton said coolly to the marina owner, and we pulled back over to the street. “Rik,” Hamilton ordered, “you take the cash and car back to the hotel. Jack, you and I will move the boat. Let’s go.”

And just like that I was walking toward the dock, knowing for certain now that someone was watching us. Someone knew. And it had to be the police. I felt like Henry Fleming going into battle for the second time. I was afraid, but something inside me had already accepted that I would be caught, just as he had accepted his death.

“They probably saw the hash next to the anchor,” I whispered to Hamilton.

“They may not know what it is,” he replied. “Once I got caught with forty pounds of hash in my suitcase and I told the customs agent it was hair henna from Egypt and he let me pass. They aren’t that smart.”

Maybe they were stupid, I thought to myself. But not that stupid. We boarded the boat and snooped around.

“Perhaps they were just decent people helping out,” Hamilton said. “Now pull up the anchor and cast us off from the dock—quietly. I want to drift for a while and see if we attract any friends. And remember, if anyone boards us, just play innocent. I’ll tell them we’re stealing the boat. The worst that can happen is we’ll be busted for theft.”

“They won’t fall for that,” I said, and instinctively looked over my shoulder and stared into the dark buildings and boats. I could feel someone’s eyes on me. I just couldn’t see them.

“You always act so guilty,” Hamilton said derisively. “You attract bad vibes. Now, pull the anchor.”

I pulled the anchor and we drifted across the marina’s basin in the rain until Hamilton was satisfied that no one was following. Then we started the engine and motored down the inky East River with the tall, checkered buildings blinking down at us. I stared back at them, and felt as Marlowe had, searching the shoreline for Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. At one point a large barge nearly brushed up against us and I imagined we would be boarded by cannibals. Finally, we rounded the tip of Manhattan and steered up the Hudson where, without incident, we docked at the 79th Street Marina. Maybe our sailing luck was changing, I thought. Maybe Hamilton is right—I’m just paranoid. After we tied up and Hamilton advanced the marina operator some cash to look after things, we caught a cab to the Chelsea Hotel.

“I told you not to worry,” Hamilton said, satisfied with himself as he caressed his beard.

“They aren’t that smart.”

“I’ll breathe a lot easier when I have my money and I’m out of here,” I said.

“Relax,” he said. “You’re bumming me out.”

The next day and all throughout the week Rik worked the telephone and kept records of sales and contacts. Between delivering the hash around town, I sat around the bizarre lobby at the Chelsea, smoked hash, and updated the ship’s log. The art hanging, or leaning, against the hotel walls was so odd, so weird, so impossible to understand. I felt trapped by an intense ignorance. I couldn’t tell what was hip and what was hideous, or what was sane or insane. Plus, the lobby seemed a spiderweb of trapped psychotic poets and artists. Or so I guessed. Which ones were the real artists and which ones were the poseurs? Who did I want to meet? Who did I want to avoid? Perhaps they were just street people who had wandered in to flop down in the beat-up chairs and smoke pot or shoot up in the elevator. When I asked Rik his opinion of them he told me they were Andy Warhol’s movie-star friends.

“Ever see Chelsea Girls?” he asked.

I hadn’t. Had never heard of it.

“Well, half the cast is down there,” he said. “You ought to introduce yourself to them. Maybe you’ll get into one of his films.”

I was too shy for that.

“I thought I saw Dennis Hopper down there the other day,” he said. “You know, from Easy Rider. Everyone hip stays here. Jane Fonda. Jimmy Page. Bob Dylan. The place is crawling with famous people. Why do you think we’re here?”

I thought we were hiding. So I sat in the lobby with the ship’s log and peered up at everyone exotic who walked through the front door. Then, quickly, I tried to write a few lines describing them. Nobody looked famous. They all looked tired and strung out. The common difference between the men and the women is the women had fresh lipstick— their one attempt at sanitary glamour. Otherwise their clothes, especially their tights, platform shoes, and ratty hairstyles were as frenzied as they were filthy. They had plenty of style, but did nothing all day but cat around.

I had done a lot of nothing lately. And I was itching to get paid and move on. I knew a few writers had lived at the Chelsea. I asked the desk clerk and he had given me a list of names of authors who had either visited or written entire books there: Mark Twain, O. Henry, Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Nelson Algren, and Arthur C. Clarke. It was pretty impressive. I went down to the Strand bookstore and bought books by the Chelsea authors. Naked Lunch by Burroughs and Look Homeward, Angel by Wolfe were a good start. And once again I began to think about what I would do with myself after I got my money. I knew I wanted to write books, but I wasn’t sure how to get started. I did know that I wasn’t going to get anything done by smoking hash and sitting in the lobby of the Chelsea, no matter how cool it was to do so.

By the second week we had sold most of the hash and the operation was winding down. We had made deliveries all over Manhattan, and I had started to relax. I told myself if there were cops they would have picked us up by now. I was constantly

surprised by who bought from us: a burned-out hippie, a well-dressed woman, a dull guy you'd never look twice at, a man in a fake wig and mustache, a preppie college kid. We met them in apartments, parking lots, coffee shops, high-rise lobbies, and on street corners. Each delivery was fifty pounds or more, so a lot of money was changing hands.

After each score Rik put the cash in a bank safe deposit box, and finally, after my constant begging, I was paid. Hamilton gave me a shoe box of ten thousand dollars in ten dollar bills. I loved my stash. I counted it. I rubbed my face in it. It smelled sweet and dirty. I played with it like a kid with a toy. I straightened up all the bills so they were facing the same way. I bought rubber bands and wrapped each hundred and thousand. It was glorious. I grinned from ear to ear.

It was while I was seduced by the big pile of cash that Hamilton chose to ask if I wanted to sail the Beaver to England, where we would take a rest before heading out to wherever we could pick up another ton. He was eager to repeat the operation. The hitch was we couldn't buy from the same supplier because, as Rik revealed, they had paid the Moroccans in counterfeit American cash and didn't want to risk dealing with them again. "They're probably pissed," Hamilton added, smiling at how clever he had been. I bet they'd give him a matching smile with a knife right across his throat if they ever caught him.

He promised me a better cut of the deal. I had mixed feelings. Sure, I wanted more money, but I didn't look forward to spending six months on a boat with Hamilton. And no matter how hard I tried I still had a nagging feeling we were being watched. I told him I'd give it some thought, but I knew I was ready to take off. I wanted to get started on my future.

I called a few colleges in New York and asked about writing programs. New York University had one, as did Hunter and Columbia. They all wanted to know if I'd come in for an interview. I hesitated. I wanted to go. But I just felt so weird. Here I was, hiding out at the Chelsea Hotel and wheeling a stolen shopping cart full of smuggled hash all over town. I just wanted to finish up the operation and clean up my act before arriving in person. I told the colleges I'd call them back. They wanted to send me information, but I didn't have an address.

And then the shit hit the fan. It was a Friday when it all went to pieces very quickly. We had sold almost all the hash. There were only a few hundred pounds remaining. Hamilton and I were in our room when Rik called. He had another delivery to request, one that would empty the boat. Hamilton wrote down the address and smiled broadly. He looked in the mirror and patted his beard into shape. "You stay here," he said. "Afterward Rik and I have to prepare the cash for shipment. I don't want to sail it over. We'll meet you back here for dinner."

"Okay," I said, and he left the room.

I had bought more film and wanted to take photos of the room doors where the writers had lived. I knew Thomas Wolfe had lived in room 831. I had recently finished *Naked Lunch* and wanted to see where Burroughs had been insane, or brilliant, or both. I figured I'd go down and ask the desk clerk if he could give me Burroughs's room number.

I was on the second floor landing when I heard a scuffle downstairs by the front desk.

"We're FBI!" shouted a man. "Stop it." There was the fleshy slap of punches being thrown and Hamilton cursing.

There were more punches and I heard Hamilton cry out, “Okay, okay, don’t hurt me. Don’t!” They must have had him pinned down.

I was frozen on the landing, unable to move. I couldn’t see the front desk from where I was and I didn’t dare look around the corner to see exactly what was happening. But I did want to hear if he was going to rat me out, or if they knew I was there. I could see the front door and watched the usual lobby druggies who crashed out across the furniture all day hop up and slink out the front door. As they did so, two scruffy men walked in.

Suddenly Hamilton shouted, “There they are! Those are the guys who own the boat.” It was a stroke of genius. The FBI agents let him go for a moment as they ran toward the men he’d fingered.

At that moment, the scruffy men pulled out their own badges and hollered, “Treasury agents! Stop!” They had been tracking down the source of the American counterfeit money that showed up in Morocco, and by coincidence arrived at the Chelsea just seconds after the FBI. It took the four of them a moment to check badges, but by then Hamilton had snaked down the back hall and out into the alley. The Feds sounded like a horse posse giving chase.

My heart almost burst. I scampered back up the stairs. I ran down to the room, unlocked the door, closed it, and locked it from the inside. I grabbed my green duffel bag out of the closet. I opened it and checked on the cash and five kilos of hash I had taken as a tip. I opened my dresser drawer and threw in my clean clothes. I hoisted my bag up over my shoulder and went to the back window. I was entirely in a panic. There was a fire escape from my window that connected down to the alley. But Hamilton had run that way and I figured the police would be milling around out there. My best way out would be through the front door. It was

either that or wait for them to come get me. I couldn't wait even if I wanted to. I was too frantic.

I opened my door, scanned the hall, clutched my bag, took a deep breath, and walked down the steps, through the lobby and out the front door. The entire time I felt an invisible hand about to grab my shoulder. My neck was clenched as hard as a tree stump. I was planning to flag a cab but the traffic was backed up so I just kept walking. I lowered my head, dodging people, passing people, growling, pushing between them to get farther and farther away. I made it down to 14th Street and into the first subway station I came to. I had a token. I decided I would go back uptown, to Penn Station. I bolted through the turnstile and took the first train that arrived. I hopped on, but couldn't stand still. I pushed my way from car to car, until I couldn't go any farther. When I reached the front, I turned around, duffel bag on my shoulder, and waited to spot the eyes that were searching for me. At least I'd see them coming. But not yet—nobody was on my trail. We pulled into a station and I hopped off and looked at a map. I ran down a hall to another platform and took another train, then another, until I got to Penn Station. I ran to the Amtrak terminal and checked the departure board. I could go to Boston or Florida. I figured I knew Florida better. I could go hide out at Davy's place at the motel until I figured out what to do.

The train didn't leave for an hour, so I went downstairs and found a movie theater. A New Leaf was playing. I bought a ticket and felt like Lee Harvey Oswald hiding out. Walter Matthau and Elaine May were talking to each other, but I couldn't follow them. I sat there with my heart beating and sweat pouring out of me. I kept checking my watch.

Finally it was time, and I dashed out of the theater, up the stairs, and across the terminal to the platform, where I hopped on

the train and found a seat. Minutes went by, then the train began to move, and for a moment I thought, I've made it. I've escaped. I felt a little clever, but my heart didn't stop beating quickly until I went to the bathroom and swallowed a couple grams of hash and later fell asleep in my seat and woke up in North Carolina. Even then I was still a wreck.

When I got to Fort Lauderdale I stumbled off and called Davy's. She had a room available. I took a cab to the King's Court. I was so happy to be there, and Davy was happy to see me.

"Welcome back to the Alamo," she hollered when I opened her door. "What are you doing in town?"

"Just passing through," I said. "I sailed a boat up to New York and am on my way back to St. Croix."

"Well, stay as long as you want," she said, and gave me the key to my old room. "You'll see half of your friends are still here." I walked across the asphalt, opened the door, and put my bag down. I double locked the door and pulled the curtains. I had made it. But I felt worse, and was worse off, than when I had first entered this room less than a year before. I sat down on the edge of my bed and held my face in my hands.

I jumped up. I went into the yellow bathroom and took off my clothes. I turned on the shower. As I waited for the water to warm up I stared into the mirror at my face. The yellow still wasn't a color that looked good on me. But it was home. I figured I'd take a shower, settle down, and plan out what to do next.