



The First Twenty Steps

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It was past midnight and I was bushed. I'd wasted the whole day on the outskirts of downtown One-West under the low, fat clouds, so low that the brilliant tip of the Spaceship was lost in them, setting them aglow. I kept to the shadows of the tiny manufacturing buildings, but all the while I was attracted to the Cathedral Complex. I found myself tracing an arc a dozen blocks from the blinding domes, the white wires, the Spaceship itself. I had nowhere to sleep--that is, nowhere I was willing to pay for. *The two hundred bucks must remain intact*, I kept vowing as I wandered the deserted streets, sure the cops were about to scream out of the night, slam me to the pavement, and snap on the handcuffs.

But the soles of my feet were screaming. I knew I couldn't keep moving all night. I'd been on my feet since two in the afternoon and I hadn't eaten since morning. Around eight PM I'd taken a leak on a wall behind Gracker's Tires--my big accomplishment of the day. I began to eye each building I came across--most for the twentieth time--as a possible place to crash. I'd see an abandoned gas station and consider how to be an inconspicuous lump behind it. But when I'd get there I'd be bathed in headlights cutting around a corner. There was no satisfying my paranoia. I reluctantly moved even further from the glowing Spaceship and found myself on the wide grounds of a grammar school.

A maze of sidewalks led past rusted swingsets to a three-story building. There were hollow places under the stone stairs leading to the second floor and I slid into one of them without thinking. I could still feel the radiance of the Spaceship coming over the top of the school, spilling onto the playground, penetrating my lair, its artificial moonlight glinting on the moist swingsets and tree leaves.

I was warm in my jacket and my head was comfortable against the stone. I closed my eyes and thought about the old gang. Danny and Pete and Rick and all the others. And the women who hung out with us. Cruising through the lake district of Drulgoorijk on Sunday afternoons--all fifteen of us on our choppers, bombed out of our minds. And Melissa. God, she was fine. After six years, I could barely remember her ...

I woke to the sight of my wallet being unfolded in front of my nose. Two puffy hands pulled it every which way. Beyond was a mass of dirty red hair and beard, and a huge flat face that looked as if it had been ripped apart a hundred times. The bum was drunk, straining to focus on the wallet. Finally he noisily cleared his throat.

"So, bub," he said, eyeing my One-West Correctional I.D. card, "yuh say yer name's--Harry?"

"No, man, I didn't say that--" I muttered. "What the hell are you doing with my wallet?"

"Hey, craphead, me and Ronnie here are rippin' ya off," the bum said. By this time he'd removed my ten twenty dollar bills. The money fluttered in the wind.

"Careful with my money," I said. I was having trouble breathing with his knee on my chest.

"Screw you, turdface," he said. "Ronnie, how much we got?" He handed the bills and my wallet to a tall, skinny guy in a glistening motorcycle helmet. But at least Ronnie rounded up several bills that had sailed to the ground.

"Two hundred," Ronnie said, voice muffled by a black visor obscuring his entire face. "This guy was loaded."

"I *am* loaded, you mean," I said. "That's my money."

"No, *I'm* loaded," the bum said, leaning over me with foul wine breath. "I'm gonna puke all over ya!"

“Eric, let’s split,” Ronnie said. “No use hangin’ around--”

“Maybe we better kill this guy,” Eric said. “No evidence then--”

“Idiot,” Ronnie said. “A body *is* evidence.”

Eric turned to Ronnie and said: “Hey, pisshead, don’t mess with me. If the vibes are right, we waste the guy. If they aren’t, then ... then we just beat the bejeezus outa him. Or something. I don’t know.”

As Ronnie argued back as the muffled voice of reason and Eric spat out obscenities, I lay contemplating Eric’s swollen left ear. Ronnie appeared to be unarmed, but Eric had a huge knife sheath at his waist pressing on my thigh.

I knew I had bad position, wedged in the shallow grotto with my knees up and my hands behind them. This space wasn’t half as big as I’d thought when I’d gotten into it--just wide enough for my shoulders and high enough to sit in. Eric crouched with his head above and outside the top of my little crypt.

I jerked my hands free, grabbed Eric by the shoulders and snapped him towards me. His forehead thudded violently into the stone wall and then he was a limp bundle of bad smell on top of me. I whipped his fat knife out and screamed: “One false move and I’ll slit this guy’s throat! I mean it!”

Ronnie backed away in disbelief. “Yeah, whaddya think I care? I got the damn two hundred!”

I struggled with Eric’s body. “Goddamn--bastard--run out on your buddy like that--that’s really--*crap*, man--” Finally I pushed Eric off and leapt to my feet with the knife.

Ronnie’s voice went up a couple octaves inside his helmet. “You can’t call me no bastard! I didn’t do nothing! I got the two hundred fair and square!”

I kicked Eric away, noting in shock the ugly mass of blood all over his forehead. I’d punched and slit my way around with the gang, but I’d never ... never knocked somebody’s brains out before. My head ballooned.

“You--you killed Eric!” Ronnie screamed, pointing at Eric’s bloody head. “I’m gonna call the cops!”

“The hell with *that!*” I yelled. “Just drop the two hundred and I’ll spare your ass!”

“No! It’s *mine!*” Ronnie screamed.

“MUFFAFUKKA ... MUFFAFUKKA ...” came the groaning at my ankles. Eric blindly pawed at the dirt, then found my leg. I blinked in dismay until I finally had the sense to kick him off. But now he was on his feet! He was a monster!

“Get him!” Ronnie yelled.

I turned on Ronnie, slashing the knife across his leather jacket. He yelped as the blade dug into his bicep and I ripped the wallet out of his hands. I jammed it in my back pocket and made to run--but Eric was on top of me, mashing me down. I lost the knife. I punched Eric wildly, got up and ran. Ronnie came at me and I sent him into Eric--Eric got up again and this time I kicked him square between the eyes, and he went down for good.

Ronnie plucked the knife off the grass and waved it spastically. I danced, he lunged, I sidestepped, and he went into the stairway. I grabbed his shoulders and rammed his head repeatedly against the stone.

“Goddammit--*idiot!*” he grunted, but I kept smashing until his helmet cracked right off. Another plunge of his battered face into the stone, one more kick to the ribs, and he was out too.

“You--*goddamn sons of bitches!*” I gasped. “Buncha drunk bums--” I gulped for air. “Dammit, I rode with the *Defenders!* I’m a goddamn *biker!* Mess with me and see what you

get!”

I limped around the side of the building. Parked by the curb in the light of the Spaceship were two gorgeous choppers. Harleys. Gleaming. Their exhaust pipes were hot. Ronnie and Eric’s. Fellow bikers. Now enemy bikers.

“Aw, *piss* ...” I moaned. I knew I had to get out of there. I was definitely out of shape after six years in prison, and I sure wasn’t up to dealing with what I knew would follow. If those two had any sort of biker code at all they’d hunt me down until they got revenge. Unless they were both dead. Then the *cops* would be hunting me. Well, maybe only four years this time ...

Beyond the scene of this idiot screw-up the freeway glistened. There were only a handful of headlights out on the wet pavement. I’d only nodded off at the school for a few minutes, and I figured it was maybe one in the morning. Some lights from small buildings made little haloes in the mist. It felt as if this city had been exactly this silent and foggy and black for millions of years. What was going on out there right now? What mysteries were those vehicles voyaging to? That freeway led straight to Drulgoorijk and my brothers. When I was ready I would take that road.

All I had was two hundred bucks and my freedom, but as I listened to my boots slapping on the damp sidewalk I had to admit I didn't know what to do with either of them. All I knew how to do was wander in the mist at one in the morning. Which was probably why I'd wasted one-fifth of my life in prison. Hell, maybe I'd wasted the whole thing.

Other people seemed to know the tricks that got you what you needed. They figured out how to get jobs, apartments, and cars. And they stayed out of trouble. And look at me, out of the pen for maybe eleven hours. Sons of bitches like Eric and Ronnie had to be *attracted* to me.

I needed to get back to Drulgoorijk, thirty miles to the east, and join up with my brothers again. They hadn't visited me in a couple years, but I'd read enough about them in the papers to know that the Defenders were still alive. And I needed to get a bike in a hurry so I could ride with them again. I hoped they remembered me.

But the point was that the only way I could think to get a chopper was to rip one off. And I definitely had to stay away from the extra-legal activities right now. I wasn't about to risk another six years down the tube. But without a job, and the apartment that went with the job, and all that insanity, how was I going to get a bike? Sure the Rehabilitation Commission said it was going to help out, but I was sick of dealing with those soulless twits. And I'd already lost the address of the halfway house they'd wanted me to sign my soul over to. Hell, maybe it *would* be easier to rip a bike off after all and be done with it. Take my chances.

I balanced on a broken curb on a rundown street where most of the boarded up paint stores or oil change shops were waiting for demolition crews. Fifteen blocks east, beyond the Spaceship, the new skyscrapers of downtown One-West rose into the clouds. I figured a storm was building.

I had to grin in disgust. They say the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime--and I hadn't even realized I was doing it. But here I stood in front of Disc Engineering. It was hard to believe I used to unlock the glass door down that stairway at 7:30 every morning. A bit further was the parking garage where I'd pull in my old Harley after the morning freeway ride in from Drulgoorijk. The garage was asphalt poured over the contours of little mounds, with the two-story brick structure of Disc Engineering mounted haphazardly on pillars above the rolling surface, the center of the building open to the sky. One reason I got here first every morning was to make sure I didn't get one of the spaces exposed to sun and rain. My bike's electrics definitely didn't like rain.

It didn't seem possible that I'd ever worked here. It was a wild place, its labyrinths filled with engineering documents, computers, engineers, salesmen, visiting presidents of multinational corporations. I just drifted into that job. Could I ever have gotten it on my own? Would I ever have thought of applying there? No, it was Melissa who got me that job--Melissa whose dad was head of Planning. I'd started there eight years ago feeling like a sucker, trying to please my girlfriend, too wrapped up in her to understand she was trying to wean me away from the gang.

I didn't realize until way later how much she hated the Defenders. But the feeling was mutual--the gang hated Melissa too. And they were down on me until I got it through my head what was important. The gang. My brothers. So I split with her, but for some reason I kept the job. Her dad was glad we broke up. After a while he even took a liking to me. I got to be an Associate in the Planning Office, but again, I drifted into it without knowing why. Guess I was having a good time. The gang thought I was crazy, making it as a white collar worker, using my head to churn out concepts while Danny and Pete and Rick and all the rest worked in garages and

machine shops. But they didn't complain about the parties I could give, all the extra beer and dope we had, all the gasoline and bike parts I could come up with when everyone else was broke. Damn, we had some great times.

But as I passed alongside Disc on Thornton Street I wondered if I could ever have that sort of life again. Danny had been the last to visit--two years ago--and even then I could see he was drifting away from me. All those years in the pen had broken something--and none of us knew why the law had come down so hard on me, why I'd been handed six goddamn years. Christ, there were murderers who'd come to One-West after me and left years before I did. What had I done that was so bad? Why had my buddies deserted me?

And though I didn't have a Melissa now to tell me what to do with myself, I did know I'd never try for another job like I had at Disc, because it would always remind me of six years at One-West, a lot of it spent in solitary for that stretch of time about three years in when I took to punching out guards and fellow inmates. Although it sickened me to admit that Danny and Rick and the rest probably didn't care one way or another if I ever showed up again, I knew I should probably try to get a job working on bikes or cars and scrape up enough cash to buy a huge chopped Harley. I had to get back to those guys. Hitting all those bars on the West Side of Drulgoorijk every Saturday night, picking up all those chicks, those had to be the best years of my life. I had to do whatever it took to get back to them.

One night when we were messed up on acid Danny and I had talked about what it meant to be a biker. When you're a biker, Danny said, you're set apart from the mass of *citizen losers* who're just crapping around with their lives, stewing in all their little worries and never having any real fun, never really laughing, never really getting their rocks off. I told Danny it was like bikers got to climb up on this catwalk that was twenty feet above that whole gray ocean of mindless jerks. Bikers were noble people, and they got to walk on this catwalk made out of bright red steel girders and have all the fun they wanted up there.

Danny loved the idea of the catwalk, and agreed with me that one of the neatest things was being able to look down on all the losers dying in the mud below and be glad you had the guts not to be one of them. "It only takes twenty steps up," we used to tell each other whenever the other was bummed out, and it'd remind us of the acid trip and that stewing in all that trivial crap was for common people, not us. Maybe that was one reason Danny and the rest were turned off by my Disc job--maybe they thought I was selling out, crawling back down the steps to wallow in common fears like everyone else.

I turned back to the bizarre shape of Disc Engineering. Dammit, was it true? Had I forgotten the twenty steps? Had Melissa gotten me back to being some common dweeb? I looked for the Spaceship west of downtown. All night long the damn thing had been *mocking* the mess I was in. Maybe it *knew* I was a common dweeb after all.

I'd seen pictures of it in the papers, but never the real thing, though the prison was only a couple miles from downtown. One businessman was financing the Spaceship. For months people had thought the Episcopalians were erecting a cathedral tower on the site where their old church had burned down, but it turned out the Episcopalians had sold out long ago, and Richard Mullein had bought the property and finally declared that he was actually building a spaceship on it. It had been a scandal a couple years ago, with the government of One-West demanding that all work on the Cathedral, as everyone still called it, be stopped immediately.

But Mullein, who owned vast portions of One-West, Drulgoorijk, and the two counties containing them, had managed to strike a deal with the city. He said his Spaceship really would be a cathedral, a nondenominational place where all could worship what he called "the Great

Creative Force,” and though he admitted he *had* wanted to build a sixty-story spaceship on the outskirts of downtown One-West, he now promised that, in deference to public safety, and the insurance rates on all those new buildings downtown, he’d never launch the thing. “I just want to be indulged in this one whim,” as he’d put it. “Can’t an aging billionaire be allowed just one whim?”

Most people knew that was crap. First of all, Mullein was only thirty-one years old. Second, nobody, including the city fathers of One-West who’d nervously accepted his demands, had any doubt that the day the Spaceship was finished, Mullein would blast it off. And if it rose three hundred feet, veered sideways and blew up downtown One-West, well, Mullein could pay for it.

Rising from the center of four white domes amid low buildings and seas of parking lots, the Spaceship was like a tall woman in a lacy white dress with both arms brought together above her head. A web of wires and tubes fed into the ship from four support towers. Floodlights drenched it all like an ice storm. Sixty stories up at the nose cone, I could see men on a platform working around open hatches. Vapor came out of nozzles around the ship. Oblivious to whether Eric and Ronnie might be roaming the area, I walked several blocks right up to the Cathedral Square, through the eye-stinging light, into the acrid gases, past the men in white overalls with clipboards who frowned at me, shook their heads, and returned to work.

Nothing happened except that I’d forgotten my stupid problems for a few minutes. The Spaceship still mocked me.