

15 TO LIFE

HOW I PAINTED MY WAY TO FREEDOM

**By Anthony Papa
with Jennifer Wynn**

Feral House

From the Author

This is a work of nonfiction. The events it describes are real. The life it portrays is mine. Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the innocent and the guilty.

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American Dream, American Tragedy

HE DRANK. I DRANK. He turned to me. “So?” he said. “You wanna make some money or what?” Polinski wasn’t much to look at. At six feet tall with a beach ball gut, he was pretty damn ugly in fact. He sported a thin moustache on his pasty mug, which only seemed to collect food crumbs and call attention to his cheap toupee, yet he always had beautiful girls around. I took a swig from my beer. “What do I have to do?”

Polinski smiled.

He told me everything would be arranged. He’d call me on Wednesday and then drop off a package at my garage that day. All I needed to do, he said, was drive it up to Mount Vernon and give it to some of his friends.

“What am I delivering and to whom?”

“If anybody asks you, you’re delivering a package to my uncle’s hat factory. As for the guys, don’t worry about them, they’re from the bowling alley.”

That’s how I’d gotten to know Polinski. We used to gamble in the bowling alleys around Westchester County and the Bronx. Any day of the week, there were different bowling houses you could go to for action: Gunpost Lanes in the Bronx, Yonkers Bowl and Larchmont Lanes in Westchester. You could make a fortune or go broke fast. For me it was part of the American Dream.

Polinski went to the alleys to flash money at the bar and buy drinks for the players. I went to bowl, to bet on other players, or let people bet on me. Some people gamble on horses, but others like to bet on people. For me, it was the same as going to the racetrack, except that I was the horse. I felt powerful standing on the lanes, knowing that the crowd behind me was betting on me, on my game, my skills.

At the time, I was in my late twenties and in great shape. Every day, no matter how bleak life seemed, whether I was hung over, broke or fighting with my wife, I pumped iron in my garage, a big old barbell with a hundred and fifty pounds of weight. And I was a pretty good bowler, though lately I'd been on a bad losing streak. The stress was starting to get to me.

"So what else?" I asked. Polinski continued.

One of his friends owned a towing company in Westchester. He would be waiting for me on Morris Avenue in a tow truck in front of the hat factory owned by Polinski's uncle. All I had to do was to give him the package.

I had a lot of questions: Why not deliver it himself, especially if these guys were his friends? And what was in the package? Drugs? Money? Some guys said that Polinski made his money working with his uncle and father at the hat factory, but I knew there was more to the story. He would have had to sell a lot of hats to afford his flashy lifestyle.

Despite my misgivings, who was I turn down an easy \$500? My radio repair business was slow and my gambling had wiped out my bank account. The winter storm that had recently hit didn't help. Just that morning my wife had given me an ultimatum: Either come up with the rent money or she was leaving. The timing was right, even though it meant breaking the law. I was desperate and Polinski picked up on it. I told him I'd do it and left.

By the time Wednesday came around, I was ready to call it off. Truth be told, I was scared. Every time I thought about it, I felt uneasy. When Polinski called me at the garage to confirm the arrangement, I said I was having trouble with my car. It was the truth: the battery was

dead and I couldn't get it started. There was no way I could do the job that night, I told him, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I'm really sorry, Tony," he said. "What's wrong with it? The battery?"
"Yeah."

An ugly silence followed. I could tell he wasn't too happy and suggested he find someone else for the job.

"There's not enough time. They need this tonight. I was counting on you, man. Listen," he said, "here's what we're gonna do. I'll have my guy José Pontes drop off the package. He'll give you a jump. Remember, this is five hundred bucks, easy money. If everything works out, it could become a steady thing. All your problems could be solved."

The words hung in the air: "All your problems could be solved."

"All right," I said, and put down the receiver. While I waited, I kept thinking that something still didn't fit. Why couldn't this José guy just deliver the package himself? I thought about the possibility of getting arrested but figured if Polinski had arranged the plan, it had to be okay. He was older than me and had tons of dough. He might be a slob, but he wasn't stupid.

I'd had a few brushes with the law, but it wasn't as if I had a record. When I was twenty, a buddy and I got busted for smoking a joint in his car. We got off with a slap on the wrist. Five years later, trying to avoid Department of Motor Vehicles rigmarole, I stupidly accepted some license plates from my boss. The plates, I soon discovered, had belonged to a stolen car. Luckily, I was issued a Disorderly Conduct and fined twenty bucks.

Was this going to be another stupid mistake? I wondered. No, this would go smoothly. I was due for a lucky break.

At about 6 p.m., while my wife and daughter were at the grocery store, Polinski's friend knocked on the door. He introduced himself as José Pontes. We shook hands and I let him in. We walked to the kitchen; José looked around suspiciously. "There's no one here," I said. He nodded.

José Pontes struck me as shady from the start. He was of average

height, stocky, with black, slicked-back hair and a thick beard. I thought he was Italian until he started talking. He was Puerto Rican.

He pulled a manila envelope from inside his jacket. "Here's the goods," he said, dropping the envelope on the table.

I picked up the package, a 5" by 7" manila envelope with a square chunk of something inside. "What's this?" I asked.

José looked around and lowered his voice. "Four-and-a-half ounces of cocaine."

I guess I'd known all along that this was going to involve drugs, but when faced with the truth, I panicked. I thought about my wife, Marylou. Yeah, we fought all the time, but I still loved her. Plus, there was our six-year-old daughter, Stephanie. Why risk all this? Was it the adrenaline rush that was drawing me in? The same thrill I got when I gambled? Something wasn't right. "So about this job ..." I started.

"Forget it," Pontes said, and then reached into his jacket. I froze, thinking it might be a gun. Instead, he pulled out five \$100 bills and slapped them in my hand.

Immediately I was back in.

"Now ... you know these guys, right?" Pontes asked. I frowned. Polinski had said that the guys bowled in the league. "I know them from the bowling alley," I answered.

Again, a wave of panic rushed through me. I told José that my car battery was dead, that I'd told Polinski that earlier. He nodded like I was pulling his leg. He got up, grabbed the envelope and tossed it to me. I caught it and placed it in my jacket.

"Come on," he said. "I'll give you a jump." After fifteen minutes, we gave up. My car wouldn't start. "Sorry about this," I said, trying to sound regretful. "Better call Polinski and tell him to deliver it himself."

José looked at me. "Listen, if you're worried about the car," he said, gesturing to his own car, a brand new Riviera parked across the street, "I'm going that way myself. I'll give you a lift."

"Can you drop me off at Yonkers Bowl after the ... the deal?" I asked. "I have to bowl in the league tonight."

"Sure, no problem." He slapped me on the back. "Let's go."

“Just a minute, I’ll be right back.” It was freezing outside and I wanted to get my red cap.

I could feel Pontes’ eyes on me as I walked back to the apartment. Inside, my wife and daughter had returned from the store. They were sitting in front of the Christmas tree we hadn’t bothered to take down from the holidays a month back.

My wife turned and looked at me. “You’re going out again?”

“I’ll be back later,” I said, wondering if she could detect the nervousness in my voice.

“Don’t forget we have to give the landlord some money tonight.”

I went into the kitchen and put the money José had given me on the table. “It’s in the kitchen,” I said, and left.

Mount Vernon was a twenty-minute ride over the Bronx border. On the way, José pulled over and asked for the envelope. I handed it to him and he opened the seal.

“Like gold,” he said, removing the block of coke from a plastic bag. Light from a street lamp overhead made the slab glitter. I looked around to see if anyone was on the road, but the area was desolate.

“Fuck it,” José said, breaking off a piece of cocaine and placing it on the dashboard. “Let’s get high on Polinski’s customer.” He laughed and switched on the radio. He re-wrapped the slab, slid it back into the envelope and placed it under the seat. “He’ll never miss it.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out what looked to be a pillbox.

“A grinder,” he explained. He opened the lid, put the rock on the screen, and then cranked the miniature handle. The coke broke down into a small pile of fine powder. With a credit card, he cut the coke into two six-inch lines. He took out a silver straw and snorted.

“Your turn,” he said, passing me the straw. It took me five or six tries to snort my line. It burned my nose and made my eyes water. Laughing at my reaction, José popped in a Latin tape, turned up the volume to a deafening level, and pulled away.

José was flying, but the coke had the opposite effect on me. I started to freak out. I’d never really messed with cocaine. My mind raced with

thoughts of the deal. What if it went bad? I mean, I didn't really know what I was getting into. I thought about my daughter, my wife... *This is crazy*, my subconscious screamed.

José must've seen the expression on my face because he lowered the volume. "Look, don't worry about nothing," he said. "Everything's gonna be all right, pal."

He took a wrong turn. We were forty minutes late by the time we got to the hat factory in a desolate industrial area. It was so dark I could barely make out the factory at the end of an unlit street. About sixty yards down, just as Polinski said, a tow truck was parked in front of the factory. José pulled over, grabbed the envelope from under the seat and handed it to me. "I'll wait here," he said.

I thought I was going to puke. The coke was starting to drip down the back of my throat and I was paralyzed with what-if's. What if I get shot? What if the cops come?

"Put a move on it, bro," he said.

"Who's that?" I shouted. A figure suddenly emerged from the front door of the factory and walked toward the tow truck. He approached the driver's side, stood there for a few moments, then turned and headed our way. It was Polinski. "What's he doing here?"

José shrugged.

Polinski walked to my side of the car and leaned toward the window. He motioned to me to roll it down.

"Everything's set," he said. His eyes were bloodshot; his high forehead glistened with sweat. He looked just as wasted as José.

I didn't get it. Why was he here? And why should I deliver the goods if he was here, himself? I looked at José, who didn't say anything. I looked back at the tow truck.

"The guys in the tow truck are cool," Polinski said. He sounded like he was trying to assure not only me but himself. He wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his glove. It was freezing outside and he was sweating.

"Polinski..." I started. "I don't get it. If you're here, then..."

He waved at the air. "Listen, I didn't think I'd be able to make it. My plans fell through."

As if that explains everything, I thought. I took the envelope out of my jacket and tried to hand it to him.

“No,” he said sharply, and stepped back. “Don’t give it to me.” Then he smiled like a used car salesman. “We already made our plan, let’s stick to it.” He told me to walk with him to the tow truck and give the envelope to the driver. He’d take care of the rest, he said.

As I walked away with Polinski, José rolled down the window and told me not to forget “to count the goddamn *dinero*.” I nodded and kept walking. My legs were shaking. I didn’t know whether it was from the coke, the fear, or both.

The inside of the truck was dark, but I could make out two figures in the front seat, both of them white men, maybe in their thirties. When we reached the truck, the door on the passenger side swung open. I looked at Polinski. He motioned toward the open door. I headed around the truck as Polinski moved toward the driver’s side.

“José?” one of the guys inside asked me. He had broad shoulders and an ugly, pockmarked mug.

“Ah, no, I’m Tony,” I said, thinking I should tell him that José was in the car.

He stared at me briefly, and then turned to the driver. They looked at each other without saying anything. Something wasn’t right.

The passenger turned back to me, nodded and then opened the glove compartment. My eyes were glued to his hand ... I envisioned him pulling out a gun. I started to think they were gonna rip us off, kill us, who knew?

But instead of a gun, he pulled out a stack of cash fastened with a red rubber band. He handed it to me and asked if I wanted to count it.

“No,” I said, remembering José’s last words. I’m getting the fuck out of here, I thought.

“Seventy-five hundred,” he said. “It’s all there.”

Seventy-five hundred? My head was spinning. We weren’t talking about chump change. “Whaddya got for me?” he asked.

My body felt like lead, but I reached into my jacket and pulled out the envelope. I prayed. *God, if I get through this, I’ll never put myself into*

a position like this again. Shakily, I passed him the envelope. He snatched it from my hand and dumped the contents into his lap. He held up the block of coke and began to unwrap it.

What if he notices the piece Pontes broke off? What if he pulls out a gun? Shit, shit, shit! My heart was pounding so hard it felt like I was being punched. He raised the slab to his face and inhaled deeply. If he noticed anything missing, he didn't say.

"Wow, this is some good coke," he said. He turned to the driver, who nodded in approval.

My job was done. When I turned to walk away, he reached toward the dashboard. With a twist of his wrist, he flipped on a switch that activated the overhead lights on the truck. The lights blinded me. I took a step backward and almost tripped. Suddenly, both men leapt out of the truck. I turned to run but before I could even take a step, I felt the cold barrel of a gun in my left ear.

"Freeze!" a voice shouted. And then, sure enough: "Police! Don't move, motherfucker! You're under arrest."