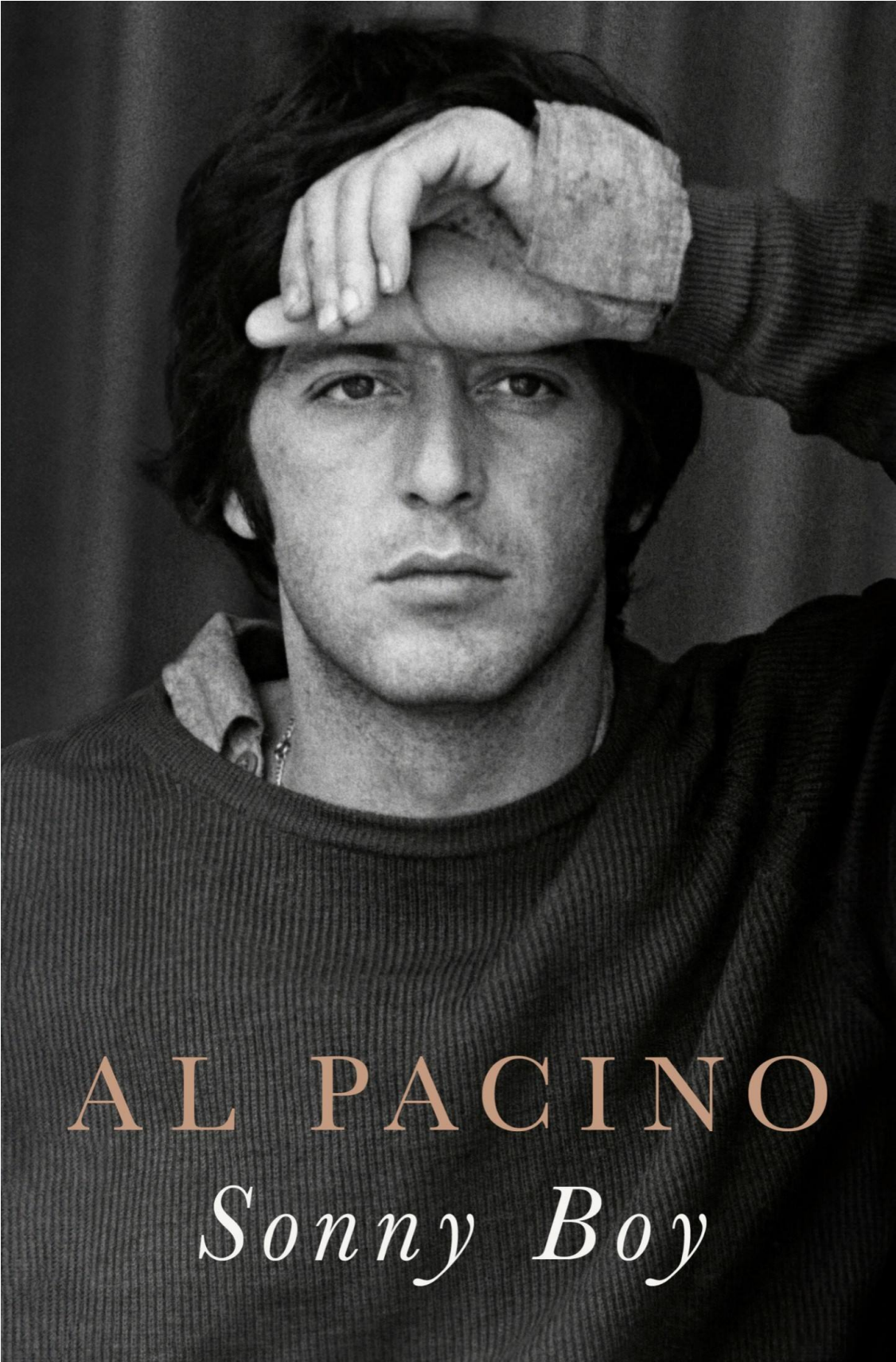


AL PACINO

Sonny Boy



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A MEMOIR

PENGUIN PRESS NEW YORK 2024

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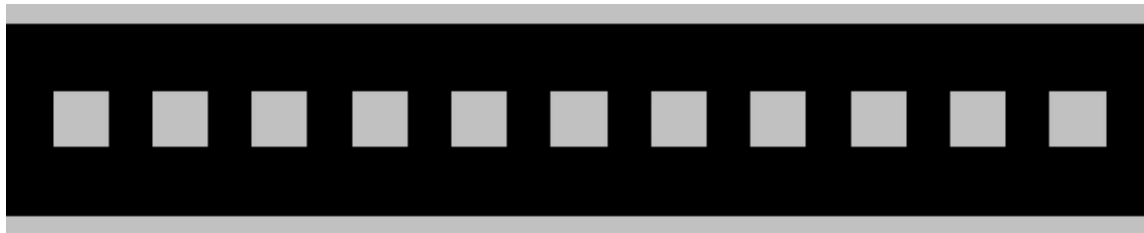
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To Charlie, to my granddad, and to my mom



1

A Blade of Grass

I was performing since I was just a little boy. My mother used to take me to the movies when I was as young as three or four. She did menial work and factory jobs during the day, and when she came home, the only company she had was her son. So she'd bring me with her to the movies. She didn't know that she was supplying me with a future. I was immediately attached to watching actors on the screen. Since I never had playmates in our apartment and we didn't have television yet, I would have nothing but time to think about the movie I had last seen. I'd go through the characters in my head, and I would bring them to life, one by one, in the apartment. I learned at an early age to make friends with my imagination. Sometimes being content in your solitude can be a mixed blessing, especially to other people you share your life with.

The movies were a place where my mother could hide in the dark and not have to share her Sonny Boy with anyone else. That was her nickname for me, the one she gave me first, before everyone else started calling me Sonny too. It was something she picked up from the movies, where she heard Al Jolson

sing it in a song that became very popular. It went like this: Climb up on my knee, Sonny Boy

Though you're only three, Sonny Boy

You've no way of knowing

There's no way of showing

What you mean to me, Sonny Boy

It stuck in her head for a dozen years, and at my birth in 1940, the song was still so vivid to my mother that she would sing it to me. I was my

parents' first child, my grandparents' first grandchild. They made a big fuss over me.

My father was all of eighteen when I was born, and my mother was just a few years older. Suffice it to say that they were young, even for the time. I probably hadn't even turned two years old when they split up. The first couple of years of my life my mother and I spent constantly moving around, no stability and no certainty. We lived together in furnished rooms in Harlem and then moved into her parents' apartment in the South Bronx. We hardly got any support from my father. Eventually, we were allotted five dollars a month by a court, which was just enough to cover our room and board at her parents' place.

Many years later, when I was fourteen, my mother took my father to court again to plead for more money, which he said he didn't have and which we didn't get. I thought the judge was very unfair to my mom. It would take decades for the courts to have some sense about a single mother's needs.

To find the earliest memory I have of being together with both of my parents, I have to go back to when I'm about three or four years old. I'm watching some movie with my mother in the balcony of the Dover Theatre.

The story is some sort of melodrama for adults, and my mother is totally transfixed. I know I am watching something that's really meant for grown-ups, and I imagine there is a certain thrill in that, in being a little kid at my mother's side and sharing this time with her. But I can't quite follow the plot, and my attention wanders. I look down from the balcony, into the rows of seats below us. And I see a man walking around there, looking for something. He is wearing the dress uniform of an MP—the military police, which my father served in during World War II.

He must have seemed familiar, because I instinctively shouted out,

“Dada!” My mother shushed me. I didn't understand why. How could you say shush? I shouted for him again. “Dada!” She kept whispering, “Shh—

quiet!” because he was looking for my mother. They were having problems, and she didn't want him to find her, but now she had been found.

When the film was over, I remember walking on the dark street at night with my mother and father, the marquee of the Dover Theatre receding behind us. Each parent held one of my hands as I walked between them. Out of my right eye I saw a holster on my father's waist with a huge gun pouring out of it, with a pearl-white handle. Years later, when I played a cop in the film *Heat*, my character carried a gun with a handle like that. Even as a little child, I could understand: That's powerful. That's *dangerous*. And then my father was gone. He went off to the war and came back, but not to us.

Later in life, when I was acting in my first Broadway show, my relatives from my father's side of the family came to see me. I was this young, avant-garde

actor who had spent most of his time in Greenwich Village and gradually worked his way onto Broadway. After the show, a couple of my aunts and a kid or two of theirs paid me a surprise visit in the hallway backstage. They started showering me with kisses, hugging me and congratulating me. They were Pacinos, and though I knew them from making the occasional visit to my grandmother on my father's side, I was somewhat bashful.

But as we made small talk, something came up in conversation that struck me to the bone. They said something about "the time that you were with us." I said, "What do you mean, when I was with you?" They said,

"When you were with us, remember? Oh yeah, Sonny Boy, when you were hardly more than a baby, not quite a year and a half old, you lived with your grandma and grandpa—your daddy's mother and father."

I said, "How long did I live there?"

About eight months, they said, nearly a year.

And suddenly things started to come together in my head. I was taken away from my mother for eight months while my father was away in the war.

But I wasn't sent to an orphanage or put in a foster home; I was mercifully given over to a blood relative—my father's mother, my grandmother, who was an absolute gift from God. I have had lifesavers throughout my time on this planet, and she was perhaps the first.

This realization knocked me over. I had a sudden clarity about the inexplicable things I had done in my life this far, at twenty-eight years old—

the checkered way I lived, the choices I made, and the ways I dealt with things. It was a revelation to learn that I had been given away, at least

temporarily, at the age of sixteen months. To have been totally dependent on my mother, knowing nothing else, and then sent off to a whole different life

—that’s a powerful rupture. Shortly after that, I went into therapy. I certainly had things that needed to be dealt with.

My dad’s mother was Josephine, and she was probably the most wonderful person I’ve ever known in my life. She was a goddess. She just had this angelic countenance. She was the kind of woman who, in the old days, would go down to Ellis Island and wait for the new arrivals, Italians and anyone else who didn’t know English, so she could help them. She cared and fought for me so much that she was given visitation rights to me in my parents’ divorce settlement. Her husband, my grandfather and namesake, Alfred Pacino, arrived in New York from Italy in the early 1900s. They had an arranged marriage, and my grandfather worked as a house painter. He was a drunk, which made him moody and unpredictable.

I have no memory of that time I spent in their household, away from my mother. I imagine my mother had guilty feelings about the arrangement. She must have. Sure, I wasn’t separated from my mother for a very long time, but at that young age, eight months was long enough.

When my son Anton was a little boy, not yet two years old, I can remember a time when we were together on Seventy-Ninth Street and Broadway and his mother wasn’t there. He had a look on his face like he was completely lost. I thought to myself, It’s because he doesn’t know where his mother is. He was actually looking for her—looking past other people on the street to see if he could find her. He was close to the age I was when I lived with my father’s parents. I never saw my son so lost at sea, before or since. I picked him up and told him, “Mama is coming, don’t worry.” That’s what he needed to hear.

My mother's parents lived in a six-story tenement on Bryant Avenue in the South Bronx, in an apartment on the top floor, where the rents were cheapest. It was a hive of constant activity, with just three rooms, all of which were used as bedrooms. These were small rooms, but not small to me.

Sometimes we would have as many as six or seven of us living there at a time. We lived in shifts. Nobody had a room all to themselves, and for long stretches of time, I slept between my grandparents. Other times, when I slept in a daybed in what was supposed to be the living room, I never knew who might end up camped out next to me—a relative passing through town, or my mother's brother, back from his own stint in the war. He had been in the Pacific, and like so many other men who had seen combat, he wouldn't talk about his experience in the war. He would take wooden matchsticks and put them in his ears to drown out the explosions he couldn't stop hearing.

My mother's father was born Vincenzo Giovanni Gerardi, and he came from an old Sicilian town whose name, I would later learn, was Corleone.

When he was four years old, he came over to America, possibly illegally, where he became James Gerard. By then he had already lost his mother; his father, who was a bit of a dictator, had gotten remarried and moved with his children and new wife to Harlem. My grandfather had a wild, Dickensian upbringing, but to me he was the first real father figure I had.

When I was six, I came home from my first day of school and found my grandfather shaving in our bathroom. He was in front of the mirror, in his BVD shirt with his suspenders down at his sides. I was standing in the open bathroom doorway. I wanted to share a story with him.

“Granddad, this kid in school did a very bad thing. So I went and told the teacher and she punished that kid.”

Without missing a stroke as he continued to shave, my grandfather said to me simply, “So you’re a rat, huh?” It was a casual observation, as if he were saying, “You like the piano? I didn’t know that.” But his words hit me right in the solar plexus. I could feel myself slinking down the sides of the bathroom doorway. I was crestfallen. I couldn’t breathe. That’s all he said.

And I never ratted on anybody in my life again. Although right now as I write this, I’m ratting on myself.

His wife, Kate, was my granny. She had blond hair and blue eyes like Mae West, a kind of rarity among Italians, which sort of set her apart from all my relatives. She may have had some German blood on her side. When I was around age two, I guess, she would sit me on her kitchen table and spoon-feed baby food to me as she told extravagant, made-up stories in which I was the main character. That had to have made an impact. When I got a little older, I would find her cooking in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, and I would eat them raw. They had little nutritional value, but I loved the way they tasted. Sometimes she gave me dog biscuits and I ate those too.

My grandmother was known for her kitchen. She made Italian food, of course, but we weren’t in an Italian neighborhood. As a matter of fact, we were the only Italians living in our neighborhood. Perhaps there was one across the street, a guy named Dominic, a jolly kid, who had a harelip. When I’d be going out the door, Grandma would stop me right in my tracks with her wet cloth, which always seemed to be in one of her hands, to say, “Wipe the gravy off your face. People will think you’re Italian.” There was a kind of stigma against Italians when we first started coming over to America, and it only escalated when World War II started. America had just spent four years fighting against Italy, and though many Italian Americans had gone overseas to battle their own brethren and help bring down Mussolini, others were labeled enemy aliens and put in internment camps. When Italian Americans

came back from the war, they intermarried with other groups at sky-high rates.

The other families in our tenement were from all over Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. You heard a cacophony of dialects. You heard everyone. Our little stretch between Longfellow Avenue and Bryant Avenue, from 171st Street up to 174th Street, was a mixture of nationalities and ethnicities. In the summertime, when we went on the roof of our tenement to cool off because there was no air-conditioning, you'd hear the murmur of different languages in a variety of accents. It was a glorious time: a lot of

poor people from various ghettos had moved in, and we were making something out of the Bronx. The farther north you went, the more prosperous the families were. We were not prosperous. We were getting by.

My grandfather was a plasterer who had to work every day. In those days, plasterers were highly sought after. He had developed an expertise and was appreciated for what he did. He built a wall in the alleyway for our landlord, who loved the wall he built so much that he kept our family's rent at \$38.80

a month for as long as we lived there.

Until I was a little older, I wasn't allowed out of the tenement by myself—

we lived in the back, and the neighborhood was somewhat unsafe—and I had no siblings. We had no TV and not much in the way of entertainment, aside from a few Al Jolson records that I used to mime along to for my family's enjoyment when I was three or four. My only companions, aside from my grandparents, my mother, and a little dog named Trixie, were the characters I brought to life from those movies my mother took me to. I had to have been the only five-year-old who was brought to *The Lost Weekend*. I was quite taken with Ray Milland's performance as a self-destructive alcoholic, which

won him an Oscar. When he is struggling to get dry and suffering from the d.t.'s, he hallucinates the sight of a bat swooping from a corner of his hospital room and attacking a mouse going up the wall. Milland could make you believe he was caught in the terror of this delusion. I couldn't forget the scene when he's sober, searching frantically for the booze that he squirreled away when he was drunk but can't remember where he hid it. I would try to perform it myself, pretending to ransack an invisible apartment as I scavenged through unseen cabinets, drawers, and hampers. I got so good at this little routine that I would do it on request for my relatives. They would roar with laughter. I guess it struck them as funny to see a five-year-old pretending to scramble through an imaginary kitchen with a kind of life-or-death intensity. That was an energy within myself that I was already discovering I could channel. Even at five years old, I would think, What are they laughing at? This man is fighting for his life.

My mother had a sensitivity for these things. I think it's why she was drawn to these kinds of films. She was a beautiful woman, but she was delicate, with fragile emotions. She would occasionally visit a psychiatrist, when Granddad had the money to pay for her sessions. I wasn't aware that my mother was having problems until one day when I was six years old. I was getting ready to go out and play in the streets, sitting in a chair in the kitchen while my mother laced up my little shoes for me and put a sweater on me to keep me warm. I noticed that she was crying, and I wondered what was the matter, but I didn't understand how to ask her. She was kissing me all over, and right before I left the apartment, she gave me a great big hug. It was unusual, but I was eager to get downstairs and meet up with the other kids, and I gave it no more thought.

We had been outside for about an hour when we saw a commotion in the street. People were running toward my grandparents' tenement. Someone said to me, "I think it's your mother." I didn't believe it. I thought, How could they say a thing like that? My mother? That's not true. I started running with

them. There was an ambulance in front of the building, and there, coming out the front doors, carried on a stretcher, was my mother.

She had attempted suicide.

This was not explained to me; I had to piece together what had happened for myself. I knew afterward she was sent to recover at Bellevue Hospital, where people who did that sort of thing were kept for a while. It's a period of time that is kind of a blank to me, but I do remember sitting around the kitchen table in my grandparents' apartment where the grown-ups were discussing what they were going to do. I couldn't quite grasp it, but I pretended to be a grown-up with them. Years later, I made the film *Dog Day Afternoon*, and one of its final images, showing John Cazale's character getting brought away on a stretcher, already dead, would make me think of the moment I saw my mother brought out to that ambulance and taken away. But I don't think she wanted to die then, not yet. She came back to our household alive, and I went out into the streets.



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the relationships with my friends on the street that sustained me and gave me hope. I ran with a crew that included my three best friends, Cliffy, Bruce, and Petey. Every day was a fresh adventure. We were on the prowl, hungry for life. In hindsight I realize I might have had more love from my family than the other three did. I think that might have made all the difference. I made it out alive, and they didn't.

To this day, one of my favorite memories is coming down the stairs and out onto the street in front of my tenement building on a Saturday morning in the springtime. I couldn't have been more than ten years old. The street was empty and the day was bright. I remember looking down the block, and there was Bruce, about fifty yards away. I felt this joy inside me that has stuck with me forever. The day was clear and crisp, and everything was quiet and still. He turned and smiled, and I smiled, too, because we knew we were alive. The day was full of potential. Something was going to happen.

Every few blocks were the vacant lots where the Victory gardens had been planted at the height of World War II. Once Eleanor Roosevelt got her Victory garden built at the White House, they started popping up everywhere, even in the South Bronx. But by the time we got to them, after the war, they were wrecked, full of debris—the flowers had gone off to heaven. Along the edges of these lots were sidewalks. Once in a while, when you looked down at the sidewalk, you'd see a blade of grass growing up out of the concrete. That's what my friend Lee Strasberg once called talent: a blade of grass growing up out of a block of concrete.

These Victory gardens filled with rubbish became our assembly halls and playgrounds. They made pretty good baseball fields, if you gathered up the garbage to make your bases.

Often I'd be playing baseball in one of those lots, and at around five o'clock I'd spot Granddad in the distance, passing by as he made his way home from work. No matter where I was in that lot, as soon as I caught a glimpse of him, I'd zip across to meet him at the sidewalk just before he

could pass by, to shake him down for enough loose change to get an ice cream.

He'd look down at me and reach into his pocket, his hand going way down to what felt like the bottom of his pant leg, finally returning with my big gift: a shiny nickel. I'd quickly say "Thanks, Granddad" and run off.

If I noticed him walking by as I was up at bat I'd yell out to get his attention, hoping he'd see me crack the ball and get on base. He'd stop and watch for a minute, and every time he was standing there I would strike out.

Every single time. When I went home, I would tell him that after he left, I got a triple, and he'd nod his head and smile.

In the neighborhood, I seemed to cheat death on a regular basis. I was like a cat with many more than nine lives. I had more mishaps and accidents than I can count, so from that bundle I'll pick a few that stick out and have significance. One winter day, I was skating on the ice over the Bronx River.

We didn't have ice skates, so I was wearing a pair of sneakers, doing pirouettes, showing off for my friend Jesus Diaz, who was standing at the shore. One moment I was laughing and he was cheering me on, then suddenly I broke through the surface and plunged into the freezing waters below. Every time I tried to crawl out, the ice wouldn't hold up and I kept falling back into the freezing water. I think I would have drowned that day if it wasn't for Jesus Diaz. He managed to find a long stick twice the size of himself, spread himself out as far as he could from the shore, and use that stick to pull me to safety. I was soaking wet and freezing, so he got me out of the cold and into the apartment he shared with his family, in the tenement where his dad was the superintendent. Jesus Diaz gave me his own clothes to wear.

At around the same age, I had one of the most embarrassing experiences of my life. I'm even squeamish to tell it now, but why not? That's what we're here for. I couldn't have been more than ten years old, and I was walking on a thin iron fence, doing my tightrope dance. It had been raining all morning,

and sure enough, I slipped and fell, and the iron bar hit me directly between my legs. I was in such pain that I could hardly walk home. An older guy saw me groaning in the street, picked me up, and carried me to my Aunt Marie's apartment. She was my mother's younger sister, who lived on the third floor in the same building as my grandparents. The Samaritan threw me on a bed and said, "Take care, man."

It was customary for doctors to go to people's houses in those days, even though their offices were just down the street. While my family waited for Dr. Tanenbaum to come by, I lay there on the bed with my pants completely down around my ankles as the three women in my life—my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother—poked and prodded at my penis in a semipanic. I thought, God, please take me now, as I heard them whispering things to one another as they conducted their inspection. My penis remained attached, along with the trauma. To this day I'm haunted by the thought of it.

Our South Bronx neighborhood had a full complement of extreme characters, and most of them were innocent. We had a guy who appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties, with a mixture of red and black hair, who dressed in a suit and a collared shirt with a loose, tattered tie. He looked like he went to a Sunday service and ashes had spilled all over him. He would quietly walk the streets by himself and hardly ever spoke; when he did, the only thing he said was "You don't kill time—time kills you." That was it. If he would have come up to us even once and said, "How are you guys?" we would have been shocked. Sure, I was a little suspicious of him, as we all were. We were like a pack of wild animals and we knew he stood apart from our species. Our instinct told us he was separate, so we didn't inquire about it. We just accepted him. There was more sense of privacy back then compared to our world now, a certain propriety and distance that people gave one another. Perhaps it's still there in smaller towns, and it's something I've always carried with me in life.