

## Hardrock

written by: Russell Tucker

I was captured in the spring of 1981 and placed on a ratty school bus with metal gates on the windows. We made a hard right at a crossroad in Queens, and headed across a bridge to a remote place called Riker's Island. My bones rattled as the bus raced across speed bumps with no intentions of slowing down. I was chained to another African American whose apprehension stood out as profound as mine. I was told that years ago prisoners were brought here by boat. Now, they say there is razor wire in the water.

“Two Puerto Ricans tried to swim across the water, but the currents sucked them down,” my seat companion said as if he could sense my fear. I peered into the water and wondered what they were thinking.

Riker's Island was the way I had been told; an island with many jails on it. One road ran down the middle of it, named Hazen Street. Buildings crowded each side of the road. Far off to my left, I could see the Bronx. To my right sat LaGuardia Airport. It was so close I could almost read the expression on the passengers' faces. If a plane miscalculated the runway it would probably crash on the Island. That's what I was hoping.

We arrived at a building that reminded me of a concentration camp I had seen on TV with razor wire curled from the ground to the top of the fence. Seagulls flew back and forth across the fence for food, but Jonathan Livingston didn't seem to be among them. We filed off the bus into the receiving room of a building called C-74, also known as A.R.D.C. (Adolescent Reception Detention Center). This was the place I had heard the stories about. The smell of fresh baked bread and warm spring sunshine were my last sensations of freedom.

Inside, a burly dark-skinned correction officer locked us in a cell called a bullpen where we would stay until someone decided where we would be housed. There were several bullpens. One pen had a sign over it that read New York. If someone was in that pen, it meant he was going home. Another pen had a drawing above it of a doleful monkey staring through cage bars with the words, “Why me?” over its head. The words

seem to resonate with me. When someone ended up in that pen, it meant he was in trouble.

Since this was my first time, a few guys and I were shipped to another building down the street called C-73, better known as the Women's House or Rosalind Singer building. It was considered a privilege. One section of it housed teenaged boys. The rest were women.

We were escorted to a two-top housing unit, on the third floor. We stepped through the door with our linen tucked securely under our arm. I returned the stares from the boys in the dayroom. In there were chairs and a TV arranged like the waiting room of a hospital. In front of us was a long hallway of cells facing each other running parallel to the day room. The cells had sliding doors instead of bars. There was an A-side and B-side. The sides were separated by an officer's control booth. The officer scrutinized us before he buzzed the next door. We hauled our linen to the assigned cell, and returned to the dayroom. The adolescents studied us as if we were a meal for buzzards. I had on new blue and white shell toed Adidas, Calving Klein jeans, a sky blue knit shirt and a navy blue London Fog jacket.

I anticipated this day. In my neighborhood, we looked forward to jail as a rite of passage. We would say things like, "When we go to the Rock (Riker's Island) we have to represent our hood." Going to jail was the *crème de la crème* of establishing a reputation. Boys came home from Riker's as men. They walked with a swagger, and had an empty look in their eyes like a soldier who had seen too many dead bodies. They commanded esteem and had status in the hood. They were known as Hardrocks. I wanted to be one, but my baby face made me look innocent.

One teen with us was visibly shaken. He went over to a corner with an inmate from the dayroom. I watched them exchanging words then exchange sneakers. The rest of us stayed close together. Another youth from the dayroom tried to convince a guy with us to give up his sneakers, but he was willing to fight. I don't know what made me do it, but I sided with the predator. I held the guy while the predator took off his sneakers. "Good lookin'," he said. Maybe I thought I was saving my butt by diverting the attention away from me.

It worked. Nobody tried me. I took two chairs to watch TV. I sat in one and put my feet in the other while some had to stand up. I was good, until the youngsters who ran the house came back from court. A big black kid named Melquan from Queens and a Puerto Rican named Dash from Brooklyn controlled two-top. Dash was short with wavy hair and he shifted his weight from side to side when he talked. I knew who Dash was by reputation. In Brooklyn he was respected because he had mastered the double cross.

While I pretended to watch TV I listened to them talk about me from the doorway. The predator I helped take the sneakers was filling them in. "You mean you let this kid come in my house and take some sneakers, and he got on the best pair?" Melquan said. "He looks soft."

"I ain't soft," I said as I stood up. Melquan glared at me and walked out of the dayroom.

In the morning we went to the gym. While some played basketball and others peered through the partition at the women on the other side, I sat in the bleachers. Melquan eyed me and I watched him. One of his flunkies joined in the game of smirking, and then asked me, "What size are those sneakers?"

The response should have been "your size." It existed in my repertoire of phrases I mimicked and rehearsed for when I went to Riker's Island. But, I took it up a notch and said, "Why don't you come and see?" He came over, and bent down to examine my sneakers. I hit him with an uppercut. We traded blows until the officer broke us up.

Later, I missed the lock out for recreation. I was tired and unfamiliar with the sound of the door opening and closing. To some, this may have meant I was afraid to come out. I was lying in bed wondering when the doors were going to open when I heard people discussing how they were going to take my sneakers. I went to the door to see who they were.

"When yare you coming out?" one asked.

"Next lock out," I said. I wrapped my belt around my hand and waited for the next lock out. I planned to hit them with my belt buckle. When the doors opened, I waked into the dayroom. One guy was standing by the door. I punched him and he fell. I put him in the dope-fiend chokehold. His partner was yelling for me to let him go. The officer ran into the dayroom, and broke us up.

“You keep getting into fights,” he said. “Do you want to go back to C-74?” Dash was standing close by. “Go back to C-74 where your Brooklyn homeboys are,” he said.

I didn’t have many Brooklyn homeboys. I only had been in New York a few years. There were a few guys from my neighborhood who were in and out of jail, but I wasn’t in their league. I was just getting better at the Island. I started hanging out with the cool guys because the girls in school laughed at my country ways. Besides, Riker’s Island was comprised of prisoners from five boroughs. What were the chances of running into somebody I knew? There was a saying about Riker’s Island that you survived not by what you know, but by who you know. “Send me to C-74,” I said. I didn’t want anyone to think I was afraid.

That night I was transferred to C-74 and housed in five main. I sat on my bed and listened to the prisoners talk through the window in their door. Their voices sounded grown and rough. I sounded naïve and timid. I had to keep mouth shut or they would know I wasn’t a tough guy.

“Did you see the new kid come in?”

“No. I was sleeping.”

“He got on new blue and white shell toed Adidas. I’m getting those.”

That night I swore at my mother, prayed and wondered what I had gotten myself into.