

**LOUIS FERRANTE**



**A JOURNEY FROM PRISON TO PROUST**

# UNLOCKED



A Journey from Prison to Proust

**Louis Ferrante**

 HarperCollins e-books







*There is no man, however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived a life, the memory of which is so unpleasant to him that he would gladly expunge it. And yet he ought not entirely to regret it, because he cannot be certain that he has indeed become a wise man—so far as it is possible for any of us to be wise—unless he has passed through all the fatuous or unwholesome incarnations by which that ultimate stage must be preceded.*

—MARCEL PROUST

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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**T**he story of my criminal life is well documented, due to the diligent efforts of law enforcement and meticulous filing of FBI documents. Government informants and criminal court records also constitute a wealth of material.

The following is my story, told by me. The names and certain identifying facts have been changed to protect the innocent, and conceal the guilty. Any similarities are unintended.



# PART I

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## THE STREETS





## I LIKE BURGERS AND FRIES

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I leaned down, dropped a knee into his chest, and pressed my gun into his forehead right between the eyes.

“Don’t kill me, I have a wife and kid.”

“Do what I say an’ you’ll see ’em again.”

He was large, big-boned, had a red beard, like a lumberjack. He was six inches away from death the length of my gun barrel. If he flipped out, or my finger twitched, I’d have a dead body under me.

“It’s a robbery. I want your truck, not your life.”

“No!” he screamed. “I don’t wanna die!”

He knocked the back of his head against the metal floor and swung his meaty arms, batting at the gun. His knuckles grazed my chin. I pushed his arms away, then jammed the barrel of the gun into his mouth. “You don’t wanna die, huh? Then shut the fuck up!”

He shook his head. His teeth scraped against the steel, his lips sealed around the muzzle. He had to taste the weapon to know he didn’t like it.

I let the steel sit between his teeth. When I pulled the gun back, he looked disappointed. The gun controlled him. He didn’t trust himself to behave without it. I think he wanted me to shove it back in his mouth, to save his life.

“Turn over.”

“Don’t...shoot...me,” he gasped. His coffee breath blasted me in the face. He was afraid to turn over, afraid I’d finish him off execution style.

“Do as I say an’ you’ll be home for dinner.”

He twisted his broad shoulders in the cramped aisle, squeezing his eyes shut.

Once he was on his stomach, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a roll of duct tape.

His wide back stretched his Snearco Tool shirt as he wrapped his hands around the back of his head. I didn’t tell him to do this; either he’d seen it on TV or was shielding himself from a bullet.

“Put ’em behine your back,” I said. “An’ press your wrists together.”

I placed my gun on a shelf against the wall. I spun the tape around his wrists, then tore it with m

teeth.

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He let out a long breath and lay still. He wanted to live.

I lifted his head off the floor by his hair, taped his mouth, then gently lowered his head to the side so he wouldn't crush his nose.

About an hour before I grabbed this guy, my crew and I had parked on a street lined with auto body shops. We smoked cigarettes and told jokes until this poor stiff swung his tool truck up onto the curb and parked.

His sliding passenger door was open, like most delivery trucks during the summer.

"I got this," I said to my friends as I jumped out of the car.

I felt a rush of adrenaline. The driver was alone, busy with paperwork when I climbed the steps on the passenger side.

"Can I take a look around, I wanna buy some tools."

He was startled at first, but quickly relaxed, probably hoped to open a new account.

"Sure," he said.

I looked down the narrow walkway. Giant toolboxes weighing a ton and standing as high as my chest sat along the walls. On the racks above me were ratchets, screwdrivers, hammers, and wrenches. The toolboxes were worth five to ten grand apiece; everything in the truck was worth over a hundred.

I pointed to tools, asked some prices.

When he looked away for a second, I whipped out a big bright .357 Magnum and pointed it at his head.

I don't know if he fell to the floor before or after I ordered him to lie down, but I stood over him as he looked up at me.

After I taped him up, I went to the doorway of the truck and waved to my friends, then went back to work.

I lifted him to his knees.

The name tag stitched into the chest pocket of his shirt read "Matthew."

"Matty," I said, "don't be afraid. I only want what's in your truck. This shit's insured, no?"

I knew it was, but wanted to reassure him that he was losing nothing.

He nodded. Sweat ran down his freckled forehead.

“We’re gonna take the truck somewhere, then let you go. We’ll call the cops, tell ’em where we leave ya, okay?”

---

The Catalano brothers climbed aboard. Chucky jumped behind the wheel and started the engine while Freddy stared at the tools.

I slid by Freddy to greet Chucky up front.

“Lift your ass.” I pushed Chucky forward and pulled a red pillow out from under him as he took us into midday traffic.

“Gimme a hand,” I said, sliding by Freddy again. He followed.

“Listen, Matty, we’ll be on the road awhile. We’re gonna prop ya up against the back door. I’ll stick this cushion unda ya, so you don’t break your ass on the bumps.”

Freddy and I lifted Matthew and dragged him to the back, where we put him on the pillow.

Once under way, driving on noisy, congested streets, I pulled the tape off Matthew’s mouth. Red bristles from his beard stuck to the glue.

“I saw a bottled water up front,” I said. “Wanna sip?”

“Please,” said Matthew, calmer now.

I put the bottle to his mouth so he could drink, then snatched a promo towel off a rack, wet it, and wiped down his face. I squeezed some drops over his head.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No problem. Listen, Matt, there ain’t gonna be nothin’ left but a tin can when we’re done wit’ this thing. Anythin’ you need, personal shit?”

“The pictures pinned to the visor, my wife and kid, can you put them in my shirt pocket?”

“Sure.”

Up front, I looked out at the road. Cars, cabs, and buses wove in and out of lanes around us. Cops didn’t know what we were up to, even as we drove alongside them. I patted Chucky on the shoulder, admiring his cool behind the wheel.

I returned with Matthew’s pictures, slipped them into his pocket.

“I’m sure they’re beautiful, I didn’t look at ’em.”

“They are,” he said. “Take a look, they’re my whole life.”

“You’ll be wit’ ’em t’night. They won’t even know nothin’ happened to ya, ’less you tell ’em yaself.”

“Good,” he said, “my wife’s a real worrier.”

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Freddy and I held on to the racks like commuters on an overcrowded subway. Freddy pointed to tools, and asked Matthew prices, already counting our money.

“Speaking of prices, would you guys mind if I asked for that metal folder up front? It’s stuffed in the dash. It’ll help me get everything straight when I sit down with the insurance company.”

“I’ll give it to you now, so we don’t forget.”

I wedged the folder under his arm.

We were driving from Queens, through Manhattan, and into Jersey. The Catalano brothers had a uncle who owned an auto body shop. He agreed to pay for the load beforehand.

Along the ride we made small talk.

Eventually Matthew felt comfortable enough to ask us personal questions.

“You got a girlfriend?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I lied, “good girl, comes from a good home. I hope to marry her someday.” In reality, I was screwing some hole I met in a nightclub. I gave him the answer he was looking for.

“You in school?” he asked Freddy, a sixth-grade dropout.

I gave Freddy a kick.

“Yeah,” Freddy answered, “I graduate this year. I’m the student council.” He meant to say he was on the student council.

We carried on like this through Queens.

As Chucky paid the toll into Manhattan, Matthew let out a roar. Freddy slapped a hand over his mouth. “Shut the fuck up,” he whispered, “or I’ll waste you right here.”

“What the fuck’s goin’ on?” hollered Chucky, checking his side-view mirrors as we pulled away from the tollbooth, merging with traffic.

“The toll guy hear ’im?” I shouted up front.

“I think we’re all right,” said Chucky. “It’s loud out there. We’ll know in a minute.”

“What the fuck was that?” I asked.

“He says his leg cramped up,” Freddy said.

“I didn’t know we were going through a toll, I swear,” said Matthew.

Freddy apologized for being rough.

We made it through Manhattan without any problems. Me, Freddy, and Matthew continued to bullshit as we entered the Holland Tunnel. By now, Matthew thought he was our friend.

“Hey, fellas,” he said, “you’re real nice guys, and you got your whole lives ahead of you. Don’t you think this stuff will catch up with you someday?”

Tunnel lights flicked by along the walls. I saw the outline of his face in the dark. I didn’t answer. I didn’t really understand his question. Good thing. I was ignorant enough to resent him for casting a black cloud over my future.

Years later, I’d sit in prison, raucous violence teeming around me, loneliness eating away at my heart, and I’d remember Matthew, and what he said to us that day.

I took Matthew’s driver’s license. “We know where you live. Tell the cops niggers robbed ya, and you’ll never see us again.”

Freddy put tape over Matthew’s eyes and walked him out into a deserted lot in an industrial area ten minutes from our drop.

“Matty,” I said, “don’t move. We’ll be right across the street, watchin’ you. When we’re done unloadin’, we’ll let you go, okay?”

“Thanks,” he said. For the conversation, for carefully walking him down the steps, for sparing his life, I don’t know. “Good luck,” he added.

“I liked that guy,” I said as we drove away.

I was seventeen years old. I liked girls. I liked fist fighting. I liked to drive fast cars. I liked hamburgers and french fries. I liked playing stickball in the school yard. And I’d just realized that I liked to hijack trucks.

**Not everyone knows** it, but the most famous Mob bosses weren’t born into “the Life.” They started out as petty thieves, graduating to bigger crimes as years passed.

Thomas “Three Finger Brown” Lucchese, the founder of the Lucchese family, was once pinched for auto theft. He went on to run Manhattan’s multibillion-dollar garment center.

Charles “Lucky” Luciano was ten years old when he was arrested for shoplifting.

The New Orleans boss Carlos Marcello, known for his feud with RFK, took a pinch for armed robbery before he was twenty.

Vito Genovese, the namesake for the Genovese family, was stopped by a beat cop as he was about to pull a stickup at age twenty.

And Carmine Galante, a Bonanno family boss, was also twenty when he was nabbed as he was about to hold up a truck in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Twenty years before my own career began, my boss, John Gotti, hijacked trucks from the same airport as me. Like the rest of these bosses, he was also in his twenties.

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A kid with big balls and no brains can go from flat broke to fat pockets with one good stickup. It's the quickest money on the street.

Soon, the kid will get the attention of mobsters.

This is how Luciano, Genovese, and Gotti began their careers.

This is how I began mine.





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