

THE ART OF MAKING MONEY

THE STORY OF A
MASTER COUNTERFEITER

JASON KERSTEN



GOTHAM
BOOKS

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FOR KRIS AND WILLIE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

To tell this story, I relied on interviews with primary sources whenever possible, reconstructing events and dialogue according to their memories. In instances where their recollections conflicted, I generally favored my protagonist's version of events unless other source material was convincing enough to override him. I also drew on numerous legal documents such as court transcripts, law enforcement reports and warrants, prison records, and wiretap transcripts. Historical and contextual material was obtained from books, newspaper articles, and interviews.

Some of the people quoted in this book consented to interviews on the provision that their names be changed. In other cases, I changed the names of minor characters myself or used established nicknames because contacting them was either impossible or impractical.

Other than a single interview provided to me at an early date, the United States Secret Service chose to remain secret, declining numerous requests for interviews. Quotes and scenes involving Secret Service agents appearing in this book are therefore reconstructed from official reports and interviews with criminal suspects.

“Modern man, living in a mutually dependent, collective society, cannot become a counterfeit. A counterfeit should be possessed of the qualities found only in a Nietzschean hero.”

—LYNN GLASER, FROM
*Counterfeiting in America: The History of
an American Way to Wealth*

PROLOGUE

It took Art Williams four beers to summon the will to reveal his formula. We had been sitting in his living room, a few blocks from Chicago's Midway Airport, listening to jets boom by for the better part of two hours. I was there interviewing him for an article for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and he had promised to tell me the secrets that made him one of the most successful counterfeiters of the last quarter century. Understandably, he was reluctant.

"I've never shown this to anybody before," he finally said with a contempt indicating that I could not possibly appreciate or deserve what I was about to see. "You realize how many people have offered me money for this?"

Some men—he wouldn't say who—once promised him three hundred thousand dollars for his moneymaking recipe. They pledged to set him up in a villa anywhere in the world with a personal guard. It was easy to picture Art sitting on a patio above the Caspian Sea surrounded by bucket-necked Russian gangsters. With his high, planed cheeks, blue eyes, and pumped-up physique, he'd fit right in with an Eastern European operation. It was also easy to think that he was full of shit, because Art Williams was a born hustler, as swaggering as any ever found on the streets of Chicago. Later I learned that the offer had been real, and that he'd declined because he wasn't sure if his guards would treat him as prince or prisoner.

"My friends are going to hate me for telling you," he sighed. "They'll probably hate you for knowing." Then he shuffled off toward the kitchen. Hushed tones of an argument between him and his girlfriend, Natalie, echoed down the hall. It was clear enough that she didn't want him to show me. When I heard a terse "Fine, whatever," I was pretty sure that Natalie would hate me too. Then came the rumblings of doors and cabinets opening and the crackling of paper.

A moment later, Williams returned with some scissors, three plastic spray bottles, and a sheet of what looked like the kind of cheap, gray-white construction paper a kindergarten teacher might hand out at craft time.

"Feel how thin it is," he whispered, handing me a sheet. Rubbing the paper between my thumb and forefinger, I was amazed at how authentic it already felt. "That's nothing," he said. "Just wait."

He cut two dollar-sized rectangles from the sheet, apologizing that they were not precise cuts (they were almost exactly the right size). Then he sprayed both cuts with adhesive, his wrist sweeping fluidly as he pressed the applicator. "You have to do it in one motion or you won't get the right distribution," he explained. After he deftly pressed the sheets together and used the spine of a book to push out air bubbles, we waited for it to dry. "I always waited at least half an hour," he said. "If you push it, the sheets could come apart later on. Trust me, you don't want that to happen."

Another beer later, he sprayed both sides of the glued sheets with two shots of hardening solution then a satin finish. "Now this," he said before applying the final coat, "is the *shit*."

Five minutes later I held a twenty-dollar bill in one hand and Art Williams's paper in the other. My eyes closed. I couldn't tell them apart. When I opened my eyes, I realized that Williams's paper not only felt right, but it also bore the distinctive dull sheen.

“Now snap it,” he commanded. I jerked both ends of the rectangle and the sound was unmistakable—it was the lovely, husky crack made by the flying whip that drives the world economy—the sound of the Almighty Dollar.

“Now imagine this with the watermark, the security thread, the reflective ink—everything,” he said. “That’s what was great about my money. It passed every test.”

ART WILLIAMS WAS THIRTY-TWO YEARS OLD and already a dying breed. In an era when the vast majority of counterfeiters are teenagers who use ink-jet printers to run off twenty-dollar bills that can’t even fool a McDonald’s cashier, he was a craftsman schooled in a centuries-old practice by a master who traced his criminal lineage back to the Old World. He was also an innovator who combined time-tested techniques with digital technology to re-create what was then the most secure U.S. banknote ever made.

“He put a lot of work into his bills,” Lorelei Pagano, a counterfeit specialist at the Secret Service’s main lab in Washington, D.C., would later tell me. “He’s no button pusher. I’d rate his bills as an eight or a nine.” A perfect 10 is a bill called the “Supernote” that many believe is made by the North Korean government on a ten-million-dollar intaglio press similar to the ones used by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Art would eventually reveal to me his entire process of making money, and I’d be awed by the obsession, dedication, and exactitude it had taken him to achieve it. But as extraordinary as his formula was, it defined his story about as much as a mathematical equation can capture the mystery and terror of the universe. Far more interesting were the forces that created and compromised *him*, and those could not be easily explored in a magazine article. Art had too many secrets to share, many of which he had hidden even from himself. He’d spent half his life pursuing verisimilitude in a idealistic attempt to recapture something very real that he believed had been lost, or stolen, or unfairly denied. What enthralled and terrified me the most was that his pursuit had very little to do with money, and the roots of his downfall lay in something impossible to replicate or put a value on. As he would say himself, “I never got caught because of money. I got caught because of love.”

BOOK ONE

SENIOR

“Yo’ ole father doan’ know yit what he’s a-gwyne to do. Sometimes he spec he’ll go ’way, en den ag’in he spec he’ll stay. De bes’ ways is to res’ easy and let de ole man take his own way. Dey’s two angels hoverin’ roun’ ’bout him. One uv ’em is white en shiny, en t’other one one is black. De white one gits him to go right a little while, den de black one sail in en bust it all up. A body can’t tell yit which one gwyne to fetch him at de las’. But you is all right. You gwyne to have considable trouble in yo’ life, en considable joy.”

—*WHAT THE HAIRBALL TOLD JIM ABOUT HUCK’S FUTURE, AFTER THEY PAID IT WITH A COUNTERFEIT QUARTER. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, MARK TWAIN*

Stateville Correctional Center in Joliet, Illinois, sits back from the Des Plaines River on a low rise, in a landscape of thirty-three-foot-high walls and ten guard towers a vision of medieval austerity amid cornfields and open plains. Built in the 1920s and inspired by designs from the English social philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the prison’s centerpiece is a “panopticon”—a four-story circular cell block with a guard tower in the dead center. Bentham theorized that the layout would project a “sentiment of invisibility and omniscience” to the inmates, who would never know when the guards in the tower were watching. For guards and inmates alike it’s a world out of Dante: a giant, clamorous cylinder hiving some of Illinois’s most violent and deranged criminals.

It was in Stateville’s visiting room, in the winter of 1978, that Art Williams Jr. had his earliest memory of his father. He was six years old, sitting on his daddy’s lap, happy in the knowledge that he would soon be getting out.

By Joliet standards, Arthur Williams Sr.—inmate number C-70147—was a small fish. He’d been convicted two years earlier for robbing a truck in DuPage County. While the crime was nonviolent, it was part of a long line of similar offenses that stretched back to his teens, and so Judge William V. Hopf had rewarded Williams’s felonious consistency with a stay in what one former warden called “the world’s toughest prison.”

That winter, there were some signs that Williams was finally getting the message. He’d been on good behavior throughout his term, and he was looking forward to resuming a normal life with his wife and three kids. Not that Williams had many positive reference points when it came to family life.

He’d been born Arthur Julius Luciano, the son of an alcoholic trucker from Sicily, and a mentally ill Irish mother. In his early years, the family, which also included his younger brother Richard, had lived

in Bridgeport—one of the toughest neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side. When he was twelve, the Lucianos moved to the suburb of Lemont, a quarry town about fifteen miles southwest of Chicago. There they were among the poorest families in town. Their house lacked running water, and Luciano and his brother would lug their water from a nearby gas station, using it to drink and fill their toilets. On their beds were packing blankets from their dad’s truck.

Things only got tougher. Within a year of moving to Lemont, Luciano’s father died after driving his rig off an overpass on Chicago’s Damen Avenue. His mother was ill-equipped to raise the boys alone. She was prone to spells of verbal fixation in which she would repeat the phrase *Lotti-fa-dotti* to herself, sometimes for hours. Within a year she remarried another alcoholic trucker, who had a tendency to go after the boys with a belt after a few whiskeys. Whatever mitigating influence the mother might have had on their stepdad’s violence ended when she died of natural causes, when Luciano was only fourteen.

Poverty can always afford paradox, and the great one of Luciano’s childhood was that somehow the family always managed to feed a pack of five or six dogs. Completely undisciplined, they were every breed and bark and occupied the house with the same prerogatives as the children. They’d sleep in the beds with the kids, and Luciano adored them. “I can’t say for sure that Art ever really loved anybody, but he definitely loved those dogs,” says Bruce Artis, one of Luciano’s childhood friends. “That was just the strangest thing about him, but maybe it wasn’t so strange—given his folks, I mean.”

By the time he was sixteen, Luciano had decided that home was not the place to be. He fixed up a broken-down ’65 Ford that his stepfather had abandoned in the front yard and began road-tripping as far from Lemont as he could afford. On one occasion he stole some checks from his stepdad to fuel a trip to Florida. After he used one to buy some fancy shoes in Pensacola, a suspicious clerk called the sheriff, who picked up Luciano and called his stepdad, who made him ride a bus back to Lemont barefoot. When Luciano was nineteen, an acquaintance recently released from prison taught him how to be a short-range con artist. He’d take a twenty-dollar bill and buy something for a dollar at a gas station. After getting his change, he would say, “Know what, buddy? I didn’t want to break the twenty. If I give you a five and five singles back can you give me a ten?” But Luciano would hand the five and four singles to the attendant, who would pass him the ten, then look at him and say, “You only gave me nine.” That’s when Luciano would respond, “Sorry about that. You know, I might as well just take back the twenty. You got nine, here’s another dollar which makes that ten and here’s another ten, so can I just get back my twenty?” By the time he was done confusing the attendant, Luciano would have an extra ten dollars.

Change raising was an ideal con for Luciano. It allowed him to make money on the road by using his natural charms. He was laid-back and funny, impossible not to like even though he was always on the make, whether it was fast money or women. With his high self-confidence, he began ranging farther afield, and to fuel his travels he graduated to paper hanging. He’d pull into a town, establish a residence and a checking account under a false name, and embark on a shopping spree. After a week or two, he’d return the goods for cash. By the time the checks bounced he’d be in the next state, on to the next scam.

It was during a ramble into Texas in the late sixties that he met Malinda Williams. She was a dark-haired beauty of seventeen who was waiting tables at a diner in Dallas. A country girl who’d grown up in the small town of Valley View, she’d moved to the city after her father got a job as a Dallas police

officer. She'd been raised by conservative, evangelical parents, and was just beginning to taste her independence right at the time that half her generation needed little more excuse than rumors of a party six states away to leave home. Luciano regaled her with tales of the big city and his travels across the country, and within days she'd quit her job and joined him on the paper-hanging trail. True or not, parts of Malinda were just as wild and unhinged as Luciano. Neither of them knew it then, but she suffered from bipolar disorder, and for the first few years there were a lot of highs. The couple latched on to the hippie movement, following the sun to places like southern California and Florida, then eventually gravitated back to Illinois and settled down in the Chicago suburb of Schaumburg, where Luciano worked various jobs in construction with his brother Richard. At some point, presumably either to avoid the draft or the law, Luciano changed his last name to his wife's—Williams. Whatever his motivation for the name change, in March of 1972 his draft number indeed came up and Uncle Sam found him. He was briefly stationed in Texas at Fort Bliss, but according to his military records he struck his commanding officer shortly after discovering that the army planned to ship him off to Vietnam. He spent the rest of his service, 533 days, in Fort Leavenworth. He was there on Thanksgiving Day, 1972, when Art junior was born.

He rejoined his wife and son after his dishonorable discharge. They moved back to Schaumburg and picked up where they'd left off. Over the next two years, the couple had two more children, Wensday and Jason, and for a little while it looked like Art senior would reform. Then, in December of '77, he was arrested for robbing the truck in DuPage County and wound up in Stateville.

On the day he visited, Art junior was too young to think of his father as a “criminal”—a distinction that comes naturally only to those of us lucky enough never to have had a family member behind bars. In a vague way, little Art knew that his dad was “in a bad place full of bad men, but it was unfathomable that he was one of them.” All he remembers was sitting on his daddy's lap in the visiting room, being perfectly happy that he indeed had a father, and ecstatically cognizant of the fact that in a few months his “pops” would be leaving Stateville to become, once and for all, a permanent presence in his life.



THINGS WENT ACCORDING TO PLAN at first. In March of 1978, Senior left Stateville to serve out the remaining six months of his sentence at a halfway house in Bensenville. During the day he worked at a wire-manufacturing plant, a job at which he excelled. Malinda visited him at night and on the weekends with the kids, and his reintegration into both his family and law-abiding society progressed smoothly. By the time he left the halfway house and rejoined his family, Magnum Wire was so impressed with Senior that the company made him a foreman, and he was able to begin anew his life as a father and husband in a three-bedroom home that was as respectable and as congruous as that of any workingman in town.

Art remembers that taste of normality with the possessiveness and incredulity of an old exile. “You wouldn't believe it, but there was a time when I was a kid when I had pretty much a normal life,” he says. “I was a suburban kid. We had a nice home. We were a family. We did normal things like go to the movies. I remember my dad taking me to see *Superman*, you know, with Christopher Reeve, and holding his hand in line and thinking that was just the coolest thing.”

Despite Senior's appearance of becoming a family man, what little Art and none of the other Williamses knew was that he had been seeing another woman even before leaving the halfway house. Her name was Anice Eaker and she was a lithe, blonde-haired, blue-eyed divorcée who lived on the other side of Bensenville with two kids from a previous marriage. From the moment she appeared she laid siege to Senior's affections with pythonic determination.

Malinda did not give in easily. She learned of the affair and insisted that Senior break it off. He did, but a few days later Anice came by the house looking for him. She even had the temerity to let herself in the back door, but instead of finding Williams she found Malinda, seething and incredulous. Little Art was there, too, and watched wide-eyed as his mother proceeded to administer a beating as brutal as any he'd later see on the streets of Chicago. By the time it was over, she had broken Anice's nose.

Anice later called the police, claiming that Malinda had tried to kill her. Confronted by Anice's thoroughly battered face, they had little choice but to arrest Malinda. Senior bailed his wife out and convinced Anice not to press charges, but Malinda sensed that getting her husband away from the other woman would require more drastic measures. She told Senior that they either had to leave the state and head back to Texas, or she'd leave him.

Senior consented to the move, and within two weeks the family was packed up and headed south. They made a go of it in Houston at first, where Senior worked odd jobs, and when that failed to pay the bills they retreated to a mobile-home park in Pleasant Grove, a suburb of Dallas. Like many such marginal communities, it hosted a mix of blue-collar strivers, wanderers, the elderly, and religious zealots. The Williamses' next door neighbors were an older couple that consisted of a World War I veteran and a Santería priestess from the Philippines. The priestess, whose name was Connie, had long black hair that nearly reached the ground, and a beautiful smile. She baby-sat the kids, sang to them, and spoiled them rotten with cookies and milk. She told Art stories about the moody pantheon of Santería demigods, conversed with invisible entities, and told him that a powerful spirit dwelled inside of him.

Little Art loved her.

While Art was learning about the dark arts with his mystical nanny, his dad was spending days on the other side of the park with an evangelical minister. With no work, an unhappy wife, and a guilty conscience, Senior was reaching for Jesus. Things came to head one day when he dropped by his neighbor's place to pick up Art and found him kneeling in front of a Santería altar with candles ablaze. Harsh words, accusations of devil worship, and hexes ensued. The minister convinced Art senior to move his family to the other side of the park and organized a trailer-park exorcism, during which he held Art down on the floor of their makeshift church and commanded the devil to abandon the boy.

Needless to say, Art was terrified and hopelessly confused—a state that would only become more enhanced by what followed: Exhausted from all the moving, her husband's bad decisions, and finally the commotion surrounding Junior, Malinda had a nervous breakdown. It manifested itself as a near-catatonic depression and rages at Senior over the fact that they'd descended from a relatively good life to the status of trailer trash.

The obvious solution, he told her, was to return to Illinois and quickly reestablish themselves. And so a little more than a year after they left, they moved back to the Land of Lincoln. They stayed with Senior's half-brother Richard, who lived in Schaumburg—only eight miles from Bensenville and Anice Eaker. Senior's proximity to his old mistress was probably enough to doom his marriage, b

the catalyst for his final break with Malinda proved far more destructive and tragic.

Senior and Anice's new plan was to enroll in bartending school, taking turns watching the kids while the other attended classes. One evening while Senior was watching the kids, Wensdae woke up and wandered into the kitchen, where she found her father at practice mixing drinks while the other kids slept. She was only five, but her memory of what happened next would stay with her like an immutable pathogen.

"What are you doing?" she asked her father.

"I'll show you," he said. He quickly left the house, returning minutes later with a bottle of red wine. He poured her a glass, encouraged her to drink it, and when she was happily dizzy, he led her into the back bedroom.

Malinda came home from class minutes later. She opened the bedroom door to find her husband lying naked on the bed with their daughter.

The fighting lasted most of the night. Senior tried to convince his wife that nothing had happened but Malinda had seen. Her rage re-erupted the next morning even stronger. As they screamed and yelled at each other, Senior rounded up all three children and put them in the car. Malinda followed him to the driveway, demanding that he leave the children with her. When he refused and prepared to get in the driver's seat, she tried to wrestle the keys away from him. He shoved her hard to the ground, then jumped into the car. As he drove off, Malinda was still on her back in the driveway, kicking and screaming for him to return the kids.

Days later, the police would pick her up from wandering the streets and take her to Elgin Mental Health Center, where she would be diagnosed with severe depression and spend the next month undergoing treatment.

Art never knew what caused the fight. Because of their individual shames, no one ever told him the truth about what his father had done. In Art's childhood mind, everything congealed around the bizarre incident with Connie, and for years he'd harbor a vague shame that it had all been his fault—the work of the vengeful spirit inside him.

SENIOR DROVE STRAIGHT TO ANICE'S house in Schaumburg. She had a room prepared for Art junior and his siblings, and welcomed them in as if she'd been expecting their arrival for weeks. Senior told his children flatly, "This is your new mother, we'll be living with her from now on."

Art's first instinct was to not trust her; the last time he'd seen Anice, after all, his mother was pounding on her face. But he quickly grew to like her. Anice employed all the dialogical tricks that suggest coziness, calling Art and Wensdae "kiddo" and "honey" and even referring to Jason as "my baby." She was particularly affectionate when Art senior was present. Over the next several months she cooked for them, played games with them, and seemed remarkably unperturbed by the fact that she had gone from two kids to five overnight.

Anice's own children, Larry and Chrissy, were older than Art junior—Larry by four years and

Chrissy by two. Larry, a budding jock who had always wanted a younger brother, duly drafted Art junior as his number one sports buddy, a role Art junior happily embraced. They'd play basketball on the courts at a nearby school on an almost daily basis, and Little Art beamed when the older boy began calling him "bro." Chrissy, a gabby little blonde, was less enthused by the three new "brats" who had taken over the house, but she eventually came to love them. Neither of Anice's kids had any relationship with their own father, and Art junior noticed that early on Anice encouraged them to call Art senior "Dad." Art junior called Anice by her name.

The kids were just adapting to the new arrangement when Malinda was released from the hospital. She quickly got an apartment in Arlington Heights and a job cleaning houses, then demanded that Art senior give her custody of the kids under threat of bringing in the law. Even though her mental stability was questionable, he made no attempt to resist.

ART JUNIOR AND HIS SIBLINGS didn't see their father for several months after rejoining Malinda. Senior called the house numerous times and spoke to the kids, but Malinda, horrified by what she had seen at Uncle Rich's, refused to allow him to visit. He swore to her that nothing had happened—he had experienced a moment of weakness, but her entrance into the room had prevented it from going further. He loved his daughter and would never let that happen again. Malinda experienced a moment of weakness too. She finally gave in and consented to let him have the kids for a weekend, stipulating that she did not wish to see his face. She would drop the kids off at her sister Donna's house on Saturday morning, where he'd pick them up and return them Sunday evening. She made sure that her eldest child knew the plan.

Everything began as it was supposed to. The kids waited at Aunt Donna's, then Senior showed up and took them out to lunch. They joked and teased each other over burgers, delighted to be spending two full days with Dad. After lunch, he told them that he had a surprise planned for them, and they piled back into the car with glee.

Art watched his father closely as he steered onto the highway, trying to divine where they were headed. All he knew was that they were not headed into the city. After an hour of watching off-ramps whiz past, shiftings of doubt moved through his stomach. His mom had never mentioned anything about a long trip.

After three hours, he began repeatedly asking his father where they were going. He wanted to go home.

Senior refused to tell him, and became short with him. He told him that they were taking a vacation and that he shouldn't complain. Art junior started to cry, but it didn't do any good.

They drove 2,200 miles, all the way to Lobster Valley, Oregon. By the time they finally broke away from the highway two days later, Art junior and Wensdae knew that they were not going home. They were now farther away from it than they'd ever been, in a fascinatingly alien landscape of pine trees, mountains, dirt roads, and ranches. Senior drove deep into the countryside, winding the car through hairpin turns until they finally crackled up a gravel drive to an A-frame house somewhere in the

middle of a forest. As Senior killed the engine, from the front door of the house emerged the first familiar thing Art had seen in two days.

As always, Anice was smiling and expectant.

MALINDA CALLED THE POLICE, but they couldn't help her much. Kidnapping aside, Senior would not have been using his real name. Later on she'd come to believe that the entire time she'd been sequestering the kids from him, he'd been setting up camp with Anice in Oregon, waiting for the opportune moment to take them back.

By now Art junior had moved so many times that he was developing a feel for impending relocation, along with a sense of absolute powerlessness. Other than food and entertainment, his desires—to stay in one place, to be with his mother, simple regularity—were irrelevant. He controlled the only thing he could, his imagination, and latched himself to books and studies as a way of riding out the parental storms. No matter where he was, school was a sanctuary, and he consistently placed at the top of his class. “He was a little geek,” remembers Wensdae. “He had these big glasses and he was always reading, usually stuff way beyond whatever grade he was in, almost like he was trying to stay ahead.”

Art's childhood dream was to be a lawyer; he'd read that it had been the formative occupation of the founding fathers and it had the ring of accomplishment. On another level, it embodied the guiding structure that he was missing at home. Fair play, a governing set of rules and principles—the way things should be. Deep inside, he knew that he was at a disadvantage compared with the kids he met in other towns whose fathers were not convicts, whose mothers were stable. He wanted to cross over into that realm, and his desire had not yet turned to anger.

THEY STAYED IN LOBSTER VALLEY for a few months, then it was on to Lebanon, Oregon, and later Mount Shasta, California. In each town, Williams, now aided by Anice, would hang paper jugs before departing. Art junior was learning to read the signs. The grown-ups would start speaking in hushed voices and appear preoccupied. The house would suddenly fill up with new goods that never emerged from their boxes—televisions, stereos, expensive suits. There'd be a celebratory night—nice dinner out, a trip to the movies, or a few gifts for the kids—followed by a predawn exit. When they left Lebanon, Art actually saw the cash—a few thousand dollars on the kitchen table. He was excited until he realized that he wasn't getting any of it.

As the towns and months went by, the separation from Malinda and the itinerant lifestyle wore on Art and Wensdae, who increasingly complained to their father that they wanted to see their mother, but the more they bugged him about it, the meaner he became. Wensdae had it the hardest. Senior had, of course lied to Malinda about nothing happening that day at Uncle Rich's—he had raped his own

daughter. According to Wensdae, that was the only time he ever sexually abused her, but her psychological wound would only grow with her body. Shortly after Senior kidnapped the children, she started wetting the bed, and on her sixth birthday Art rewarded her with a large present, beautifully wrapped. She eagerly opened it to find that it was a box of diapers. She ran off crying. Art junior ran after her and tried to console her, but he was so miserable himself and shocked by his father's cruelty that he just ended up crying with her over the fact that they wanted to go back to Mom.

Anice's colors darkened too. Once it was clear that Senior had no intention of returning to Malinda, both Art junior and Wensdae got the feeling that they had become unwanted baggage. "She was completely fake," says Wensdae. "She'd ignore us when my dad wasn't around; then if he was she'd suddenly try to act like a mom."

The one place Art junior began to feel at home was Mount Shasta, a town of about three thousand tucked away among the mountains and redwoods near California's border with Oregon. Surrounded by national parks and graced with stunning views of an eponymous fourteen-thousand-foot dormant volcano, the town had the magical aura of a wonderland. He made fast friends with a local girl who lived up the road. Her name was Lisa Arbacheske, and during the summer of '82 he spent nearly every day with her.

"Her life seemed so perfect," he remembers. "She had a house down by the river, a big, beautiful log cabin. They had horses. She was the most beautiful little girl, with long, brown, curly hair. My first kiss was with her, on a log near her house. It was the happiest I'd been in a long time. She made me feel loved."

Art wanted to stay in Mount Shasta, but by then Wensdae's psychological rebellion had intensified beyond Senior's control. In addition to the bedwetting, she developed a habit of muddying her clothes after her father dropped her off at school, and sometimes removing them altogether. When school authorities complained, Senior and Anice panicked that he'd be discovered and arrested.

Toward summer's end Senior left town, taking Wensdae and Jason with him. He came back two weeks later driving a brand-new Ford Bronco, but the kids weren't with him. He told Art that he had dropped them off in Chicago with their mother, and to pack his bags because he would be joining them in a week.

"I didn't believe him," says Art. "I thought he had done something with them, and I freaked out. I remember fighting with him, and that was the first time he ever hit me, really hard in the face."

A few days later, Art said a tearful good-bye to Lisa, then climbed into the back of the Bronco which was crammed with the family's belongings. He still didn't believe that his dad was taking him back to Illinois, and spent much of the next three days sobbing in the back while the rest of the family repeatedly told him to shut up. But he wasn't the only miserable child on the trip. "On the way back my parents ran out of money," remembers Chrissy. "So we stopped in these little towns, and my parents made us get out of the car and knock on people's doors to beg for money. I hated it; we all hated it. That's how we got gas money."

It was only once they crossed into Illinois that Art junior began to think his father might be telling the truth; when the Chicago skyline came into view, he was convinced. Senior drove all the way downtown, where he parked in front of a shelter for women and children on Sheridan Road. He told Art to wait, then went inside. A few minutes later he reemerged. Malinda was with him.

Over the years Art would scour his memory for clues and explanations for what happened next.

“He gave me a hug, and I asked him if I’d see him again soon,” remembers Art. “He said he loved me and said, ‘Yeah, I’ll see you again.’ ”

It was a perfectly normal farewell, as if the nine months he had spent as a kidnapped child had really been a weekend after all.

IT WAS A ONE-TWO PUNCH that ended Art’s childhood. The first was his father’s leaving; the second blow came about a year afterward. The family had continued to live in Schaumburg after the Senior’s departure, and although Malinda found it a struggle to support three kids on her own, things hadn’t gone too badly. The children were overjoyed to be back with their mother, and Art, now free from the constant moving, excelled at his new school, Eisenhower Elementary. He not only achieved the best grades in his class but became a star on the school’s wrestling and baseball teams, his success on the latter no doubt thanks to many an afternoon spent practicing with Larry.

Malinda had gotten back to normal too. She’d had no more breakdowns since leaving the Elgin Mental Health Center, and had even begun taking an interest in her sister’s seven-year-old son Gregory, who had tragically developed a brain tumor. There was little hope for him, but Malinda did not believe that her sister was responsibly seeing to the boy’s care. Donna had started dating a biker named Bobby, and Malinda was outraged that her sister was engaged in a romance with a leather-clad hooligan while her son was fighting for his life. And as siblings are prone to do, she reported the situation to her mother in Texas, who in turn chastised Donna.

Donna was furious. She showed up at Malinda’s apartment with Bobby in tow. Malinda was out grocery shopping with the kids at the time, but upon their return Donna and Bobby were waiting by her motorcycle. As Malinda emerged from the car carrying bags of groceries, Donna intercepted her, and the two sisters immediately fell into a heated argument. Art was at first excited at watching the two adults fight, but the feeling quickly turned to terror.

Without warning, Donna reached into one of the grocery bags Malinda was carrying, snatched out a bottle of beer, and struck Malinda square in the temple. Malinda dropped as quickly as if she’d been hit by a sniper’s bullet. Art ran to her.

“She wasn’t moving,” he remembers. “I knew it was bad. A neighbor called the paramedics and they could see by the looks on their faces that it was really serious. They tried to rouse her but they couldn’t. They took her away fast.”

Donna was long gone by then. She’d sped off with Bobby as soon as she heard the sirens, and the kids spent that night at the home of the neighbor, a kind woman who lived alone who had called 911. When she called the hospital for an update, she was informed that Malinda was in a coma.

The coma would last one month.

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