

The following is an excerpt from Patrick Middleton's book, *Eureka Man*, available through Smashwords and Amazon.

1977

CHAPTER TWO

RIVERVIEW PENITENTIARY'S FIRST annual Memorial Day fast-pitch softball game between the Vanguard Jaycees and the Pennsylvania Lifers Association had been brazenly advertised as the "Mother of All Softball Games." This was because it was known that the Lifers Association's new pitcher, Calvin Africa, had once pitched a one-hit shutout against the internationally famous King and His Traveling All-stars. According to the bold print on the bulletin board flyers, Calvin would pitch to every Vanguard batter from behind second base while wearing a blindfold.

The game drew a bigger crowd than the donkey softball exhibition between the guards and the Jaycees had two years earlier. Packed in the bleachers on the first base side of the infield was a mural of black and white faces belonging to the prisoners from Homewood, the Hill District and other ethnically mixed Pittsburgh neighborhoods. On the third base side was the entire entourage of North Philly prisoners who had shown up on the breeziest, sunniest day of 1977 just to keep an eye on their downtown rivals who were sitting in the shade fifty feet away down the left-field sideline. After eyeing their foes back, the South Philly gang seemed convinced that the sky-blue hue of the sky would keep the blood-red red of the Norris Street, Oxford Street and Diamond Street boys content for at least a day. Pigeons that had escaped the city streets and pebbled sidewalks agreed and found refuge on the rooftops of the hundred year old clapboard buildings beyond the outfield fence--the prison chapel, the Young Guns Boxing Gym, and the Free Yourself Law Library. Even the thirty or forty rednecks and born-againists sitting behind home plate felt safe enough to cheer for their team, the all-white Vanguard Jaycees, and wave their homemade banners while the sandwich peddlers, clothing merchants and queens walked by.

Early Greer, the head orderly and only horticulturist inside Riverview Penitentiary, was sitting in the top row of the Pittsburgh bleachers reading the *Post Gazette* and socializing with his friends, Peabo, Oyster and Bell. Early tapped his index finger against the front page and said, "Another niggah's on his way to jail. This guy caught his wife fucking a dog and shot her three times."

Peabo didn't take his eyes off the batter, but said, "That's a crime of passion if ever there was one."

"What about the dog?" Oyster asked. "He kill the dog too?"

"We betting or what, Peabo?" Early said.

"Read the details first."

Early straightened out the paper and read the story. "Forty-six year old Maurice Wiley from Bruston Hill in Homewood was arrested yesterday morning for killing his wife in their home at 461 Mayview Street. According to police, Wiley discovered his wife, forty-two year old Mabel Joyce Wiley, engaged in a sexual act with Wiley's

American Bull Terrier and shot her once in the head and twice in the chest. Wiley is being held without bail in the Allegheny County Jail.”

When it was apparent that Early was through, Peabo said, “That’s a simple crime of passion.”

“Nah,” said Early. “Three shots was overkill, man. I say he gets life.”

“Life!” said Oyster. “For a crime of passion? Shouldn’t no man get life for a crime of passion. That’s what those crackers did to me.”

Bell looked at Oyster when Oyster uttered the word cracker.

“Okay, Early. Let’s bet. How much?”

“The usual,” Early said. “Loser buys ice cream for a week.”

“You’re on.”

“What about the dog?”

“What about the damn dog, Oyster?” said Early. “You’re not making one bit of sense. It wasn’t the dog’s fault. A dog ain’t got no sense.”

“Well, it’d have to go just the same. I wouldn’t want no dog hanging around my house after it’s been with my woman.”

Early pulled out a stack of three by five index cards from his shirt pocket and wrote Maurice Wiley’s name on one and then recorded the bet Early and Peabo had just made. Ever since they had made a game out of betting on new arrestees, Early had been keeping stats on each one: name, age, race, type of crime and location, amount of bail, name of the judge, and any other relevant facts he could glean from the newspaper or the six o’clock news. Before laying down a bet, he usually studied his facts like a statistician, unless the bet was a sure thing. Maurice Wiley was a sure thing. Maurice Wiley had committed premeditated murder and Early was certain the man would receive nothing less than a life sentence.

A band of young bucks walking by the bleachers transfixed them for several seconds, as did Tommy Lovechild, a born-again pedophile who was sitting on the bottom bleacher handing out Jesus Saves tracts. “Give yourselves to Jesus, brothers, and you can enter the kingdom of heaven.” Two of the young bucks stared at Tommy, not sure if they wanted Jesus’ kingdom or to knock the smirk off Tommy Lovechild’s pitted white face. Tommy stared back and said, “You can curse me out, brothers, and you can beat me black and blue, but I’ll love you just the same.” The taller of the two young bucks smacked Tommy’s hat off his head and told him to shut the fuck up.

“That man’s out!” cried Bell. The runner on third base tagged up and scored on a shallow fly ball to left-center. “He’s out, ump!” Bell’s protest was drowned out by the B&O railroad cars rattling along the banks of the Ohio River just beyond the prison wall.

“Bell, you know damn well you can’t see that good,” said Oyster.

Bell, who had lost his left eye somewhere along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, said, “I can see better than that umpire. That man was out!”

Early, Oyster and Peabo joked with Bell, but never argued with him. Not because they feared the five-one, hundred and twenty pound white man, but, rather because of where he had been. “*La rue sans joie*,” the Street Without Joy. Shortly after arriving at Riverview four years ago, Bell had stood up at his first lifers meeting to tell the members something about himself and ended up taking them to the Phong Dien district of South Vietnam, 1970, where his Third Battalion of the 187 Infantry had gone to support a pacification program. *La rue sans joie* was where Bell had lost his left eye while rescuing

a seven-year-old girl from a burning hamlet. When he described with piercing poignancy how he had passed the little girl's body to the medic while her skin remained in the crook of his arms and how, seconds later, a mortar exploded five feet from where he stood on *La rue sans joie*, Early knew by the way Bell had uttered those four French words, *La rue sans joie*, that Bell was permanently astonished and in need of a friend. That was four years ago and since then, Bell had been spending every spring and summer evening watching softball games and eating ice cream sandwiches with Early, Oyster, and Peabo on the top row of the first base bleachers.

Bell stood and stretched between innings and said, "This game reminds me of 'Casey at the Bat.'"

"Casey? Who the hell's Casey?" Oyster asked.

"You never heard the poem, 'Casey at the Bat'? It's famous. It's about a baseball team that was losing a big game just like these guys are. 'The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville Nine that day.'"

"We don't read no poems where I come from, Bell," Oyster said.

The Lifers had the bases loaded for the second time in the inning. Peabo bit into the fried onions on the corner of his sandwich and nudged Bell who was already sniggering. Oyster spit out a popcorn kernel and hollered for the umpire to invoke the mercy rule. Early laid the newspaper in his lap to stare at a prisoner who was standing near the right field fence. Early couldn't see his face. All he could see was a tall lanky fellow, wide at the shoulders, standing with his back to the game and apparently gazing at Early's flowerbeds on the other side of the fence. When he finally turned around, what Early saw was a young man whose beauty bloomed along with the sweet Williams, morning glories and chrysanthemums. "That's him," Early said. "Remember that boy we read about who killed a boy in reform school last summer?"

"Used a baseball bat, didn't he?" said Peabo.

"Yeah. We didn't want to bet on the outcome because he was just a kid."

"Don't say *we*!" Oyster said. "I wanted to bet. He was a white boy and I said right from the start he'd get off light because he was white."

"Yeah, well, you were wrong," Early said. "They gave him life. I read about him in my neighbor's hometown paper. That's him standing over there by the fence." Early pointed toward the first base foul line.

"He don't look like no killer to me," said Peabo.

"Looks more like a choir boy," said Oyster.

"Reminds me of *Billy Budd*," said Early.

"Billy Budd? Who the hell's Billy Budd? He in a poem too?"

"How do you know that's him?" asked Peabo.

"Cause they put him in a cell right up the tier from me when they brought him in two days ago. Read his door tag. His name's Priddy—Oliver Priddy."

"And lookie there!" said Oyster. "The booty bandit's on him already!"

"If he only knew what we knew."

"Yeah. He'd leave that Louisville slugger alone."

"You ain't never lied, Early."

"Kill the umpire!" Bell yelled. "That man was safe by a mile!"

No sooner did Bell protest another close call at home plate than the controversy died and two hundred and fifty pairs of eyes shifted to the new prisoner, Oliver Priddy. A

passerby stopped dead in his tracks to sing about what they were looking at. “A fight! A fight! A nigger and a white! Look at that nigger beat that white!”

Early flexed the newspaper in his fist while he watched Winfield “Fat Daddy” Petaway knock Oliver to the ground, then stroll away before the guard in the number one tower could figure out what the commotion was all about. When Oliver got to his feet, he headed behind the backstop and paused right in front of the born-again who were reciting Bible verses out loud. Early and the others watched Tommy Lovechild ease up to Oliver. “Do you know Jesus?” he asked. “Would you like to come and pray?”

The other born-again gathered in a tight knot of seven on the bleachers and then separated into two lines of three with Deacon Bob up front. Then they jumped down and circled Oliver like a lynch mob.

Oliver reached for the hand that pressed into his shoulder. “Heal in the name of Jesus!” Tommy Lovechild prayed. But before he could say it again, Oliver grabbed his hand and bent it back until it folded like a hinge.

“Let go! Oh, God! Ple-e-e-ease let go!” Tommy cried before he fainted. It was only then that Oliver let go.

But the born-again wouldn’t leave well enough alone. The one called Swanee concentrated on Oliver’s long sinewy arms while Deacon Bob tried to restrain him in a full Nelson. In one quick motion Oliver freed himself and found Bob’s throat. It took several minutes for Swanee and the others to wrestle him to the ground where they laid hands on his prostrate body and began praying in tongues. Oliver struggled to get to his feet just as the goon squad turned the corner of the icehouse and trotted across the ball diamond.

“You men get back!” the fat sergeant shouted, waddling his tub of guts while he whirled a black baton over his head. “Get off that man!”

As quickly as the sergeant commanded, the born-again dispersed and the guards beat down Oliver’s flailing arms, handcuffed him and snatched him off the ground in one violent jerk. Even though the excitement was over, every prisoner on the yard watched in silence as the guards jacked Oliver up and carried him away to the redbrick Home Block.

The procession came down the first base line and Oliver swiveled his head toward the bleachers, apparently oblivious to the drip and slide of blood from his nose. “Hey, what the hell’d I do?” he asked. His voice was laden with incredulity.