

# The Point Guard

by Jason Pinter, 1979–

Published: 2008

in »Killer Year«



„Here’s how it goes down,” Big Tim said. „I walk in there first. Calm as shit, you know? I go to the back, pour myself one of those Slurpees, check out the goods, look at the expiration dates on the milk, whatever. I’m gonna have your cell number plugged into my phone. As soon as I see one of the counter bunnies head for the bathroom, I’m gonna press send. When you feel your phone vibrate, that’s your cue to bust in there and make shit happen. No sitting outside with your thumb up your ass, and I don’t want to hear it took you a while ’cause you were chatting up some chickenhead outside. Far as I’m concerned, today you’re asexual. Reproduce like a spore and shit. Bottom line, when Quik-E-Mart man heads to the john, you walk in there and stick your piece in the other guy’s face. Then we’re out in less than a minute. Think you can handle that, dipstick?”

Kevin looked at Big Tim. His eyes showed no lack of confidence, if anything they showed that Big Tim would kill himself just to get you. The kind of guy you always

wanted on your team, only because you knew he'd put himself in harm's way just to get the job done. Until this week, Kevin had always had a gentle respect for Big Tim. Tim had always protected the neighborhood kids, sometimes taping a lead pipe to the inside of his boot so he'd be ready for battle in case one of those head cases from Marionville decided to hop on the bus, steal some pocket money, head back with wallets stuffed with one dollar bills.

Big Tim was always on their side, sometimes sending those pricks back with bruised shoulders, maybe a broken finger, one time sending a kid back with a concussion so bad the newspaper picked it up, ran a pic of the kid on page seven. Kid never came back, and Big Tim walked around showing off that pipe to anyone who looked, saying that tiny scratch on the end came from denting that Marionville kid's thick skull. You were never in danger as long as Big Tim was around. When he was younger Big Tim lost plenty of fights, but would always come back with a stick, a rock, or a bat to even the score. Pretty soon kids stopped picking on Big Tim. Even if they won the scrap, walked away with a few bucks, Big Tim came back with a vengeance. If you won the fight, you slept with one eye open that night.

Right now Kevin wasn't thinking about that. Big Tim was standing in front of him, wearing a plain gray sweatshirt, gray sweatpants. Usually Big Tim wore a throwback jersey—Bill Russell, George Gervin, Moses Malone—and jeans baggy enough to hide a pipe or whatever instrument he decided on that day. His usually spiky hair was free of gel, neatly combed back, though it looked ready to spring free at any moment. If Kevin didn't see that gleam in Big Tim's eye, that pupil ready to explode, he wouldn't have recognized Big Tim at all. And that was the idea.

Big Tim had given Kevin the gun the day before yesterday. Big Tim had approached him after basketball practice, pulled Kevin aside. He spoke in a hushed tone. It frightened Kevin. Big Tim never spoke softly. If anything he spoke in exaggerated barks, making sure anyone with decent hearing would pick up on it.

„Listen, Kev,“ Big Tim said. Big Tim kneeled down on the pavement, checking once around each shoulder to make sure nobody could hear or see them. Kevin's heart beat fast. For a moment he was worried that Big Tim might be pissed at him, might take out that pipe and hurt him. Kevin could only imagine what his dad might say if that happened. Then he wondered if his dad might use Kevin's injury as a reason to call Kevin's mom in New York. Then Kevin wondered whether getting beat up would be such a bad thing if it meant his mom might come visit.

When Big Tim reached into his tattered blue knapsack and pulled out a small gun, holding it out to Kevin butt first, Kevin knew a beating was the least of his worries.

„Take it, little man,“ Big Tim said. Kevin looked at him for a moment, worry in his eyes and his heart. „Go on little sucker, take it. It ain't loaded.“

Tentatively, Kevin reached out and took the gun. It was lighter than he thought it would be. It was all black, small round bumps on the handle. There were scratches along the muzzle, and what looked like remnants of a number.

„Serial's been filed off,“ Big Tim said. „Ain't got to worry about anyone tracing this shit.“ Kevin nodded, as though that made perfect sense.

„Why...” Kevin said, unable to finish the question.

„That’s a .380 Bersa Thunder,” Big Tim said. „Sweetass gun. Got a combat-style trigger guard and an eight-shot mag. You can tuck this baby into your sock, unless some fool is Superman they won’t notice a thing.” Again Kevin nodded.

„Why are you...”

„Take it home tonight,” Big Tim said. „Sleep with it under your pillow. Get used to the look, the feel. Don’t be scared, like I said, it ain’t loaded, so you don’t got to worry about blowing your two-inch dick off.”

Kevin wanted to tell Big Tim that his dick was bigger than two inches, but now didn’t seem like the best time.

„Saturday,” Big Tim continued. „You’re going to meet me on the corner of Elm and Winwood. Three o’clock on the damn dot. You know what’s on the corner of Elm and Winwood?”

„The 7-Eleven?”

„Damn right. Knew I picked the right kid to help me out.”

For a moment, a spark of pride leapt up within Kevin. Not too many people received compliments from Big Tim, and they usually came after a beating, with phrasings like, Your face can’t get any uglier and I can’t fuck you up any worse than your mommy already did.

„So you gonna meet me at that corner at three. If your dad’s ain’t passed out drunk, tell him you going down to the park to play ball. Not like he’ll notice, but I know some cats down there’ll tell anyone who asks you played all day Saturday. Even scored some nice buckets. S’what they call an alibi, little man.”

Kevin nodded.

„At three o’clock, you and me, we’re going to rob that shit. We should come away with ten grand, easy. We split it seventy-five, twenty-five. Means you take home two thousand, five hundred dollars.”

„What do I do with two thousand five hundred dollars?”

„Bitch, I don’t care! Give it to your pops to pay rent. Buy some manga books and shit. Do whatever you want. But that’s a shitload of money. You’re just lucky I’m being nice and letting you in on my deal.”

And that’s where they stood right now, outside the 7-Eleven. Big Tim in his gray sweats, Kevin in jeans and sneakers. Just like Big Tim had instructed, Kevin was wearing a T-shirt under a brand-new fleece. Big Tim had bought the fleece for ten bucks on the sidewalk. That way, he said, Kevin could toss the fleece away and any descriptions would be wrong as hell.

„They’ll be looking for some chump in a blue fleece, not some cool kid with a T-shirt.” Again with the praise. Kevin soaked it up, loved it.

„Let’s go over this again,” Big Tim said. „When Towelhead goes to take a shit, I call you. You bust in with the gat, stick it in Mrs. Towelhead’s face. I’ll be in the back by the ice cream. Don’t look at me, talk to me, even think about me. That way people won’t think you had an accomplice, screw the whole investigation up.” Big Tim handed Kevin a brown paper bag. „Say you want the register. The whole register. Give ’em this and tell them to fill it up.”

Kevin looked at the small bag, saw a tiny piece of turkey at the bottom. He looked at Big Tim.

„I used it for my lunch yesterday, you got a problem with that?“ Kevin told Big Tim he didn't. He also wondered how ten thousand dollars could fit in such a small bag, but he didn't say anything. Big Tim probably knew better, and if there was anyone at their school who could have ever seen that much money it was Big Tim.

Big Tim lived in a nice house, much nicer than Kevin's. Big Tim's parents were still together, and Kevin heard a rumor that they owned a thirty-four-inch television. Big Tim would sometimes come to school in a different throwback jersey every day. He bragged about owning a jersey from every team in NBA history, even the ones that didn't exist. Once Kevin saw Big Tim's dad drop him off at school in a black car. It looked clean, didn't have a scratch on it, and Kevin could see through the windshield that Big Tim's dad was wearing a nice suit with a bright red tie. Kevin had never seen his dad with a tie, and the families in the neighborhood that did own cars tended to buy them at a place owned by an Italian named Sal who had a mustache and didn't accept returns.

„Now if Towelhead number one comes out of the john before you're done, wave that gun at him and tell him not to move a muscle. See, these stores got security buttons behind every register. If he's in the john, you only got one to worry about. You watch him like a hawk, make sure he doesn't make any funky movements, you'll be golden. Once you get the money, run like a fucking asshole.“

Big Tim pointed to the alley behind the 7-Eleven.

„I opened that Dumpster so you don't have to waste a second. Toss your sweatshirt in there, take a left at the fence, run like hell and you should get away before anyone sees you changed your shirt. Tuck the money into your pants. We'll meet up at four o'clock behind the church in Riverside. If I find out you're holding back on me, I'm gonna get my pipe and bash your skull in.“

Kevin shook his head, telling Big Tim not to worry about it. He'd never do such a horrible thing.

„Okay, little man,“ Big Tim said, smacking Kevin on the shoulder. „You ready to become a big man?“

„I think so,“ Kevin said. His stomach felt like it was about to leap out of his throat. The gun felt so heavy against his waistband.

„I know what you need,“ Big Tim said, smiling a frightful grin. He reached into his pocket, then took the gun from Kevin's waist. Kevin heard a small clinking sound, and watched as Big Tim popped out a long black compartment and shoved several small pellets into it. He then clicked it back into place, and thumbed a small lever on the side.

„Loading her up,“ Big Tim said. „Don't want you going in there naked.“

„Am I supposed to shoot someone?“ Kevin asked.

„Not unless you have to,“ Big Tim answered.

Big Tim looked inside the store, nodded to Kevin. „About that time, friend. You ready?“ Kevin's heart surged, and he nodded emphatically. „Then let's do it.“

Big Tim opened the door, eliciting a jingle from inside. Kevin took several short breaths, gathering himself, feeling the gun in his waist. It was heavier now.

Kevin waited a few minutes. It was getting colder outside. Summer turning into fall. For a moment, Kevin wished he were playing basketball. JV tryouts were coming up, and he needed work on his free-throw shooting. The last point guard

had gotten the call from the varsity squad, so Kevin knew there was an opening at the one. If only he was good enough.

Then he felt it. The vibration from his pocket. Big Tim was ready.

Kevin reached in his pocket and turned off the phone. He took one more quick breath. He was nervous, but Big Tim had called him „friend.“ Big Tim didn't just say that to anyone. If he was man enough to do this, he was man enough to run Coach Raskin's basketball team.

Kevin opened the door. He didn't step inside immediately, instead waited to see if anyone looked at him, noticed him. None did. He was just another kid stopping in for a Slurpee, a stick of beef jerky, maybe he'd get crazy and try to steal a Kit Kat. But not Kevin. Kevin saw one man at the counter. His complexion was dark and he wore a neatly trimmed beard. He smiled as he handed an old lady some change. Kevin looked around, saw the sleeve of a gray sweatshirt in the corner and knew Big Tim was watching.

Without another thought, Kevin walked up to the counter.

„Hello, my friend, what can I get for you?“ Kevin didn't know what to say. He fished into his pocket and pulled out the brown paper bag. He placed it on the counter.

„I'm sorry,“ the man said. „I do not understand.“

Kevin reached into his waistband, and with the confidence of Big Tim thrust the gun into the man's face. The smile disappeared like it had never been there. He hands instinctively raised.

„What are you doing?“ the man asked, his voice quivering. Kevin noticed a small piece of turkey on the counter. It must have fallen out of the bag.

„Put the money in the bag,“ Kevin said. He looked back at the corner, tried to see the expression on Big Tim's face.

The man nodded. He pressed a button and the cash register rang open. Kevin watched as the man pulled out a combination of bills, forty or so, and stuffed them into the bag.

„Now please, please leave.“

„How much money is that?“ Kevin asked.

„I don't know,“ the man said, shaking. „Two, three hundred dollars.“

„I want the whole ten thousand,“ Kevin said, deepening his voice, trying to sound as intimidating as possible. It was working; the clerk looked ready to pass out from fear.

„I don't have that money here,“ the clerk said. „It's in the safe.“

Safe? Big Tim didn't say anything about a safe.

„Could you open it?“ Kevin asked, feeling a slight crack in his confidence. He looked again for Big Tim, saw nothing. He heart hammered. He wanted to get out. He wanted to practice his free throws. He didn't care about the money anymore. But Tim...

„I don't have the combination,“ the man said. „They come every night and open it and take the money. I only have what's in the register. Please take it and go.“

„Tim!“ Kevin yelled. The store went silent. „Tim, do you have the combination for the safe?“

Kevin heard nothing for a moment, then a subdued, „Shut the fuck up“ was uttered from the back of the store. Big Tim.

„Tim, the money is in the safe. He doesn't have the combination. Do you?“

„Goddamnit kid, shut your fucking mouth.“

Kevin didn't have ten thousand dollars. He had three hundred, tops. Big Tim would beat him with the pipe. He'd have to go to the hospital. His father would frown at him. He wouldn't call Kevin's mother for help. And everyone would laugh at him in school.

Then Kevin heard the opening of a door, and the second clerk, a heavysset man with a shaved head, appeared.

„What the fuck!“ he cried out. Without thinking, Kevin turned to the second clerk, remembered what Big Tim said (Not unless you have to) and pulled the trigger.

Thunder shook the store, and the gun leapt from Kevin's grasp. He heard a scream, saw a spurt of red that had to be blood and the second clerk fell into a heap, clutching his chest. The patrons made a mad break for the door, the jingling disappearing amidst the chaos. Kevin saw Big Tim in the corner, his eyes wide, a look in them Kevin had never seen before.

Sheer terror.

Kevin reached down and picked up the gun. It was warm. And still heavy.

He pointed it back at the first clerk, who was frozen behind the counter.

„Please,“ Kevin said. „Open the safe.“

„I... I can't,“ the man said. „For the love of God, don't shoot me.“

Kevin pulled the trigger again. There was another explosion, and the clerk clutched his shoulder, red seeping out from between his fingers.

„Tim!“ Kevin yelled. „Can you come up here and help me?“

His eyes wide as dinner plates, Big Tim slowly walked to the front. His mouth was open. Fear and confusion in his eyes.

„I need you to open the safe. They didn't have the combination.“

„I don't have it,“ Tim said.

Kevin felt tears well up in his eyes. „I can't get you the ten thousand dollars,“ he said. „Please don't be mad. I didn't know they would have a safe. I promise I'll get it somehow, just don't hurt me.“

„I won't,“ Tim said, but there was no emotion in his voice. Kevin picked up the brown paper bag, dots of blood sprinkled on the sides. He extended it to Tim.

„This is all I got. Take it.“

Tim took the bag. Stood there holding it. His eyes fixated on the gun.

Just then Kevin heard another jangle. The front door opened again. Kevin turned around to see three police officers inside the store. They were all holding guns. More guns than Kevin had seen in his life. And all the guns were pointed at Kevin.

The one closest to him, a woman with her hair tied back in a ponytail, yelled, „Put the gun down now, son, and step away.“

Kevin nodded, but held the gun.

„Tim?“ he said.

Tim said nothing. Just stood there with the bag.

„Tim?“

Again, nothing.

Kevin looked at the police officers. They didn't look like they wanted to hurt him.

„Come on, kid,“ the lady officer said again. „Put the gun down.“

Kevin’s mother used to wear her hair in a ponytail. Kevin used to lie in her arms, smell her hair, that shampoo she used with a hint of jasmine. He wanted this woman to pick him up, hold him. Kevin felt hot tears streaking down his cheeks. He mouthed a word, wasn’t sure what it was.

„Goddamnit, kind!” It came from a male voice, rougher, deeper, from behind the woman. „Drop the gun!”

Kevin looked at Tim, who stood there like a statue. Tim wouldn’t help. He couldn’t. It was all up to Kevin.

„I just want the money in the safe,” he cried. „Do you have the combination?”

The lady cop looked at the other officers. Then she said, „Sure we do, kid. Put down the gun and we’ll give it to you.“

„Really?”

„Really,“ she said.

„Really,“ said the man cop.

Kevin looked at the man. Looked at the woman. She looked honest. The man did not. Kevin looked at the gun. Looked at the man cop again. Looked at Tim.

„I’ll get you your money,“ he said. Kevin raised the gun. Pointed it at the man cop. Then he heard another explosion, and before the darkness hit he wondered if this would be enough to get his mom to finally come visit him.

