# “The Beast Side of Baltimore”

## Exclusive excerpt from *The Cook Up* by D. Watkins

The War on Drugs is trash; it’s just another way for the top 1 percent to benefit off of the pain that accompanies poverty. A bullet wound, a life sentence, or an OD for us is a paycheck for them, but there’s hope — the new wave of white-suburban-Rice-Krispy-treat-after-school-soccer-program drug addicts may bring the change we all need.

I teach an English class at the University of Baltimore. We cover a range of topics dealing with culture and the way it’s documented, and somehow drugs came up — “There’s an awful heroin epidemic sweeping across our country,” a small white woman with big eyeglass frames said, bursting into tears. “Our kids are quickly becoming addicted and dying!” She removed her frames to wipe her face before saying that she never thought her suburb would mirror a drug-infested city.

“Maybe it’s new to you,” I replied. “But if you’re black and poor, the heroin epidemic has been around.”

I showed them what East Baltimore was like in the 90’s by telling them about Yellow Face Kerry with the short cornrows and how he liked to carry the same things to the park every day. A lighter, a tablespoon, a hypodermic needle, a belt that doubled as a tourniquet, and a sack of dope when he could swing it.

Kerry would strangle his calf with his belt till a few veins blushed and popped, then he’d flick, flick — flick the lighter until a sturdy flame hung under his tablespoon. His eyes flared as the fire made the spoon glow orange. The liquid contents inside bubbled until it reached the right temperature, one that he could only eyeball. Then he’d dab the tip of his needle into the heated solution until it filled the syringe. The next stop was in that rose-bruised calf vein where he sank the needle and pulled back the plunger until a little of his own blood flushed in, then a push returned that glob of dope-mixed blood back into his system as he loosened the belt and slipped into an easy nod.

He’d float away to wherever dope fiends float to, as the rest of us preteens would play basketball next to the bench he leaned on.

Kerry didn’t scare us, because his presence was normal — junkies, dope fiends, sales, shooters, base heads, or whatever your region calls them — were normal.

I’ve been a professional writer for two years now and away from the drug game for over a decade. It feels like eons since I parked European cars smack dab in the middle of poverty — jumped out like a pop star with pop star clothes on and received all of the praise from the other dealers, the ladies, the fiends, and basically everybody but the cops. Today I walk those same blocks as an advocate: a person who pulls kids away from the drug game, not by demonizing their actions but by exposing them to other options that kids like us don’t normally get and by telling the truth about selling drugs — how the money doesn’t match the risk and that it’s a vicious trap that has captured them, me, and the dudes that came before. Again, this isn’t new; it has been like that forever.

Back in the 70’s, Nixon’s War on Drugs planted the seeds, which were fertilized by Reagan and Bush in the 80’s, then grew into the field of mass incarceration that was harvested and cosigned by Bill Clinton in the 90’s. John Ehrlichman, Nixon’s domestic policy chief, told Dan Baum of *Harper’s Magazine* that Nixon’s War on Drugs was meant to target black people.

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news,” explained Ehrlichman. “Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

Their plan worked as we watched the number of African Americans being incarcerated soar past whites, to be released back into society as partial citizens. *Partial* because drug policies can easily make you unemployable, leave you ineligible for financial aid, public housing, and welfare. You are basically like a slave, a captured human with partial rights. What do you do for money? How do you assimilate? This is America, and everything costs something.

Having nothing drives a person crazy, pushing them toward two realities — that of a user, or that of a dealer.

I use art to explain these things, and admittedly at times it’s difficult. The drug game has changed. I’m a dinosaur, a house phone, a walking tombstone. Friends mentioned in the earlier version of *The Cook Up*, some of the guys that even made it to the book launch, are now dead and gone — RIP to Cheese and Pretty Boy Kory. There’s a shortage of us thirty-somethings that barely crawled out of the 90’s, leaving me to be one of the few cats from that era with positive insight. And trying to define those harsh times to these new dealers with their dyed dreads, painted-on jeans, and drug habits worse than the junkies they serve is tougher than a MIT algorithm. I don’t understand their language, their moves, the selfies they take with their weapons, or the point of them *slangin* — the money is even less than when I was active.

But when the young bulls do listen I explain that in Baltimore, 97 percent of the people born into poverty die in poverty and I understand that *heroin dealer* is one of the few jobs that is always hiring. It’s been like that in our inner cities and will continue to be like that until those unfair drug policies are changed. And the government and big business profit off of those same policies, so they aren’t excited to change anything — which means it’s up to us. We are responsible for getting guys like Yellow Face Kerry the help he needs and kicking the drugs out of our own communities.

What my student didn’t know is that the current white addiction is not a new wave. Many articles have been published on the rampant drug use in white communities and how it surpasses use in African American communities, even though the media and stereotypes would lead you to believe the opposite. The wild card is held by these Percocet-slinging pharmaceutical companies who can’t wait to have doctors prescribe the drug for anything from a slightly scratched pinky to a bad day — and I fully understand that addiction because the pills had me too; luckily the prescriptions weren’t half as easy to get in the early 2000’s as they are now.

So many people in white communities are going Percocet crazy that doctors are finally being called out for their role in creating the epidemic and forced to lessen the large amounts that they were shelling out, but it is too late. Percocets are like synthetic heroin so if the doctor cancels your prescription, you can get the same feeling from the street pharmacist and that’s exactly what the white kids are doing. As a result, treatment centers are popping up everywhere — I hope this leads to us effectively addressing the issue of narcotics addiction.

I well up with depression when I think about Yellow Face Kerry and his battle with addiction. White people and those in more privileged areas are starting to feel the same; and even though I’d never wish that pain on anybody, I’m glad this problem is finally getting the attention it needs. I hope books like *The Cook Up* help raise the awareness we need to change these issues — but the first step is acknowledging that the War on Drugs is trash and that the top 1 percent gains from that pain.
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I saw bullets rip through the faces of adolescents.

I saw mothers abandon their kids. I saw fathers go out for milk to never return. I saw kids turn into killers. Cops steal and grandparents raise infants around here.

I saw kids slap spit out of adults.

I saw the devil. I saw dude shake dude’s hand before whipping out his gun and making dude put his hands up.

We go through midlife crises at fifteen around here.

I saw friends kill friends. I saw friends kill friends and then attend their wake. I saw teachers tell kids that they’d die like their parents or siblings. What does hope look like?

I saw shot dudes in wheelchairs be shot again while they sat in their wheelchairs.

I saw shots that made bodies flip. I saw colostomy bags burst, guts spill, brains on the curb, brains on the wall, brains by the car, contusions, limbs knocked off, faces rearranged, eyeballs, small intestines, and flesh chunks. I saw flesh sizzle like minute steaks.

We all self-medicate around here.

I saw murder after murder. I’ve smelled murder. I saw bodies rot. I read 150 teen obituaries — all with short bios. I know hate.

I saw barefoot families, I saw drug money buy churches, I saw hoop dreams spark and fade. I saw all types of dreams spark and fade. I saw house raids, I saw families evicted, I saw AIDS spread, I saw thousands made, and lost right in the middle of the place where cops enforce, terrorize and collect — I saw it.

I saw it all.