

YOUNG BOYS: IT WAS A BAD DREAM

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AN OPEN letter to a former lieutenant in Young Boys Inc.

Dear B.P.:

I've still got the letters you wrote back in 1985, bragging that selling dope was "the most fun" you'd ever had. Since then, one of your heroes, Raymond Peoples, has been gunned down, not far from the street corner where he started his drug ring. Since then, the organization you called "Paradise" -- the heroin- selling ring known as Young Boys Inc. -- has faded and been largely forgotten. You, however, remembered it all.

I was shaken by your first letter, the one in which you talked about how you used to dodge the rats scurrying through the Jeffries projects, about how you grew up without a father, without much hope for a "cultured existence." In the beginning, I suppose, Young Boys seemed to supply what was missing from your life. You didn't know then that it would all come apart in shoot-outs over control of territory and cash, or that most of your leaders would end up locked in federal prisons or laid out in funeral homes. You didn't realize then that those who live by the sword often die on its blade.

WHY DID you write? Was it only to recall the years when you and your young buddies sold drugs and watched people being tortured and murdered? Did you simply want to share with me your memories of the big-time parties downtown?

The way you told it, Young Boys Inc. was just one big, rowdy fraternity house party, and everybody in the room was very young and smart and caring. You noted that "Raymond Peoples . . . (and others) formed YBI before they were old enough to vote. But not (too young to) carry guns." You said you knew that if you ever had any trouble, the gang members would always be there "to take care of me, and to look after the interests of my mother and brothers."

Your description of Raymond Peoples was interesting. You called him, "resourceful, very direct, uncomplicated, tough, cool, all-male but without the need to over-assert it, sane and self-reliant, gallant and natural." Those are high-sounding words for a good-looking thug who played chess, quoted from the Bible and did time for his role in founding Young Boys. That was a strange way to remember a man who was tried three times but never convicted of beating out the brains of a Polish baker with a cement block.

But, hey, I'm not here to quarrel with your version of history. You're entitled to your opinions even when they don't square with the bloody facts. It's not my business that you believed that the drug leaders who followed Peoples were "lesser and more brittle gods." I just want to know why you wrote to me -- not once, but three times. Once you even enclosed a chart with a cast of characters.

DID YOU really expect me to join you in feeling sad over the collapse of an organization that once sold \$400,000 worth of heroin a week in Detroit? I'm willing to admit that the bands of disorganized dope dealers roaming Detroit today are just as bad as YBI and maybe worse. These days, crack cocaine is the name of the game, not heroin, and it's a game anybody can play. The city is littered with crack houses; some of them even run two- for-one sales offering bargain-conscious junkies two rocks of crack for \$5. These days, most of the dealers snort and smoke their own stuff, unlike YBI's young pushers who were in it mostly for the money. The dealers still rip each other off and settle their scores with Uzi submachine guns. That is why you read so many stories where somebody says he was just walking along the street when he heard a shot and looked down and saw that he was bleeding. That is what people say when they don't dare tell the truth.

All the same, I don't long for the time when YBI's leaders delivered heroin to teenage runners who stuffed their packets into plastic garbage bags and sold them first in the area surrounding the Jeffries projects and eventually all over town. Whether or not you know it, I don't really think you miss YBI either.

What you miss, I think, is the sense of purpose that you got from helping to build an organization, from creating something from scratch with your own sweaty hands. You miss having heroes, even heroes as faulty and flawed as Raymond Peoples. In those days, the days you called the good old days, you knew where you were headed; you had a full tank of gas, a map of the city and clear directions. But most of your heroes are dead, now, and the money you piled up can't buy you either pride or protection.

IN YOUR THIRD letter you abandoned your swaggering, tough- talking pose and finally got to your point. When you were scuffling with rats in the Jeffries projects, you wrote, all you thought about was making money. "What do I dream of now?" you asked.

I think what you want now is for someone to tell you what to do with your life besides riding around in Jeep Cherokees with gold-toned \$150-a-piece rims or going to ethnic festivals with 20 gold chains around the neck of your designer jogging suit. You need some other, more lasting dreams. You need some heroes who won't let you down.

I've learned a lot about you from your letters. I know that you can juggle ideas around and make words dance. You could fill up a bookshelf with your experiences and thoughts, and the youngsters growing up now in the Jeffries and elsewhere would gobble up every word.

Tell them about the emptiness of having big money but no enduring dreams, of having a giant gold ring for every finger but not knowing what role you were meant to play in the world. Tell them about the good old days, when it was easy to forget that there was no future in standing on street corners selling death.

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