

HE MESSED UP AND HE KNOWS IT. DID HARD TIME AND SURVIVED. NOW HE DOESN'T WANT FORGIVENESS OR PITY. JUST A JOB.

Have  
Purpose  
Royal  
Holmes's  
redemption  
ball is filled  
with dirt  
struggled  
from  
the prison  
yard.

THE

# Redemption

OF ROYAL HOLMES

BY  
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## 2009. F Building, Smith State Prison, Glennville, Georgia.

The hole. / Tin roof, hundred-degree heat. A single 4-inch-square vent sucks no air because the doors are sealed. Inmates had been flooding the toilets, washing shit under the doors. A mess to clean up. Now the guards say, *Go ahead, flood it. Down.* / A rat scurries in the gloom. It knows when the food trays arrive. It sits in the corner and waits. Throw a boot at it. Stun it, grab it, flush it. It'll be back. / Overhead, torn magazine pages smeared with toothpaste filter the fluorescent light. Coagulated toilet paper forms a gray scab over the window, blocking the sun. It's hot.

Sacrifice a T-shirt to wipe the floor. Then dip your shirt in the toilet and spread it on the concrete and lie there in your boxers. Just lie there until the sun goes down. At night the boxes stink. Rapping, screaming, banging. Someone wants you to know he's ready to kill himself. Someone else beats on your wall all night—you never learn why. The sooty walls themselves are inscribed with a thousand voices, frayed bits of falling code from men long arrested: Bible scriptures, racist creeds, gang boasts, cell-door raps.

That's the hole. You lie there now, at the bottom of the world. Your name is Royal Holmes.

**THE MAN'S STORY IS TYPICAL** in some respects. Typical in that he fucked up. Let's be clear: Royal Holmes is not a hero. His character isn't lacking in faults, nor is his past unblemished by bad behavior. Even today, in 2013, his file hangs in the bulletin. But he's not here to shame Holmes for what he did. We're here to see how his crime destroyed him, and how he recast himself from the rubble.

Because as common as place as Holmes's fall may have been, his later rise requires some explanation. How does a man so burdened by the combined weight of society's censure and his own desolation manage to ascend again? How does a two-bit hood, sitting in the bowels of some of Georgia's worst prisons, rise to become a paragon

of mental and physical fitness, an entrepreneur, and the inspiration for a major play?

For anyone who has ever done something undeniably stupid—and who hasn't?—the answers to these questions may yield clues to an even deeper riddle: Can we ever escape the past? Or are we all bound to walk forever in the shadow of yesterday's mistakes?

**IT WAS A STREAMY NIGHT** in June when it happened. Royal Holmes had just turned his back on his old life in Atlanta and moved to Waycross, in southern Georgia, to go back to school. He had a Pell grant and a Hope scholarship and was racking up credits for a business degree. The night in question, in fact, he was due to meet with his teacher for help with a core class.

But innocence marks the beginning of every sad story. En route to the meeting, Holmes met a guy—let's call him Mike. And Mike had a proposition. Not too far away was a certain house. And in the house was \$300,000, just waiting for the first man with the balls big enough to walk in and take it. The door was open. No one was home.

Holmes pondered this. He was no angel, to be sure. As a kid growing up fatherless on the streets of Atlanta, he would've soon been down lots. He'd even jack a drug dealer now and then if the opportunity presented itself. But he wasn't as bad as some other guys. He never robbed from someone's home.

That's the danger with comparisons. Someone will always be more crooked than you are, and as long as you can point to that person, you can not kneel. What's a robbery, anyway? Simply a matter of moving money around. An accounting problem. Bankers do it all the time.

And events conspire to help you believe this. You need to be evil to commit a crime. You just have to be able to lie to yourself.

"You can't even see it, can you?" Mike said waddling. "See what?" Holmes asked. Then Mike showed him the butt of the sword-off shotgun stashed down his pant leg.

Holmes could have walked away at that point. But he could also tell himself that the guy would never be used. After all, if no one was home, who could it be used on?

**"TO ME IT'S A HORROR STORY,"** Holmes says now.

We're talking in his old fitness studio in Stone Mountain, Georgia. It was once a boxing gym. Its only bright spot is a blue-lit exit sign. Holmes transformed it into a workout space, hand-pointing the logs on the wall, constructing furniture from scrap wood.

**✉** **Lilient**  
In prison, Holmes found a measure of success in entrepreneurship. Here he works out in his fitness studio. Put your name in the box.

salvaging mirrors from somebody's basement. The only thing he paid for was the trash can.

Over the next few days, the studio serves as our interrogation facility, where Holmes gradually divulges details of his story. The going isn't easy: a 30-year incarceration leaves its mark on a man. Soldiers call it the "hundred-yard stare." In ex-cons, it's a sudden hardness that disarms natural expression, a wall that drops down. In prison you need that wall to survive. After prison, it's a liability. Anything can trigger it. Especially salt of the past.

"You may look back at your memories and have good stuff back there," says Holmes, now 38. "I don't have that.... I have to keep looking forward." And when he looks forward, he has a vision:

By the time he hits 40 he wants to have people working for him. He wants multiple revenue streams, and he wants to make up for 30 years of lost opportunity.

Even making it this far wasn't easy. Whatever your feelings about crime and punishment in America, about the 2.2 million people behind bars and the additional 4.8 million who are either on parole or on probation, one point is hard to dispute: A convict's troubles do not end when he leaves prison.

Holmes applied for dozens of jobs when he got out, but every application carried the same leg shackles: *Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offense?* Even McDonald's wouldn't take him. He had a lead on a part-time job at UPS that would entail a 90-day unpaid orientation. More recently,

though, an application asked only if he'd been convicted in the past 7 years. He did the math and left the box unchecked.

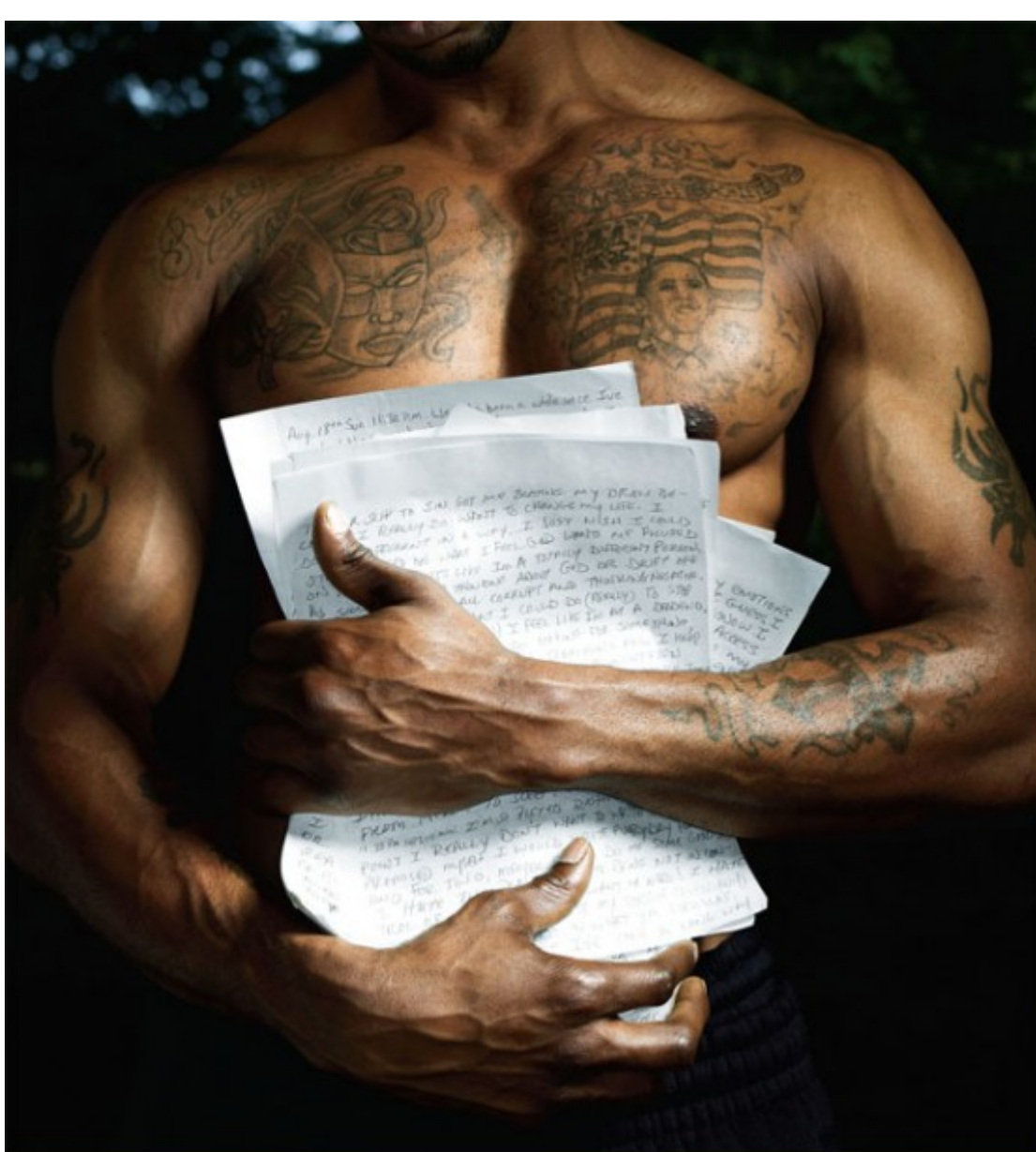
Could it really be true that the only people who can hope for success are the ones who have never known failure? Holmes didn't think so. That's why he is where he is today. In a world where nearly 60 percent of ex-cons with backgrounds like Holmes's are rearrested within 3 years, it seems like a success story. Perhaps you really can escape the past, even one as nightmarish as his.

That's when something about the windowless doorman of a studio seems familiar. It drops on you: Take away the paint, the salvaged furniture, the hand-lettered motto on the wall, and what you're left with, basically, is a prison cell.

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**NO MAN IS ENTIRELY FREE** of his past. The past exerts an inhibiting effect on our ambitions—the man you were can loom larger than the man you hope to become. At its worst, the past consigns us to a caste system in which everyone dutifully participates. The overweight guy remains overweight. The underpaid guy remains underpaid. The felon remains the felon.





**Accomplished**

Holmes spent years filling paper with musings, regrets, entire novels—and felt the reward of achievement.

**NOW HOLMES PRESENTS A**

large cardboard box brimming with handbooks. The blank pages are covered with his handwriting: thoughts, regrets, recollections, business plans, essays, even full-blown works of fiction.

It took time. Years. But like a man with a spoon and a vision of freedom, he kept at it. “I found my freedom inside,” he says. “As I started achieving small goals, like finishing a book, or doing 1,000 pushups in 2 hours—it was, like, anything is possible, because I’m achieving goals *in prison*.”

Even if Holmes were just an ordinary felon, there would still be something to be learned from this: a readiness to claim the future in whatever way a man can. A conviction that, even at the very bottom of the world, there is a way forward.

Holmes still couldn’t step outside for a run, but when the guard came by at 5 a.m. to check for yard call, Holmes was always ready. He’d bring socks, put them on his hands, reach up to grab the top of the chain-link cage, and pull himself up. Over and over.

**“IT’S NOT SOMETHING EASY**

to talk about,” Holmes says. “I never talked about this, never ever in my life.” The studio walls feel close. The past is still there, where it always is, snarling in the corner like a demented old dog.

It was nearly 12 years ago, in Waycross. The sun was dropping behind the pines as Holmes and the man called Mike cut through a field toward the house. The occupants, an elderly couple, were supposed to be at church, but the kitchen light was on and a TV could be heard.

Mike eased open the kitchen door and slipped inside. The old Royal Holmes followed. In the den, a wisp of gray hair was visible over the top of a recliner. Mike approached from behind. He dropped a T-shirt over the old man’s face and throat and demanded to know where the money was.

That was the moment when Holmes realized that the situation was beyond his control. Mike had become

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In prison there is no stepping outside. The only way out is through books, assuming you can get them. Holmes bribed fellow inmates to smuggle them in. He read anything he could get his hands on. A biography of JFK. A history of Poland. Tolkien. Michener. The bigger the book, the better. “I had to force myself to put them down,” Holmes says. “I had to force myself to come back to reality.”

There is no way of exerting your will in this world, no way of telling it who you are. The danger is that you’ll forget. Then the hole wins, and you become nothing. You join the hole. You become the hole.

Now you hear the demonic clamor of your fellow inmates differently. It’s not the sound of madness. It’s the sound of men trying to keep madness at bay.

But howling and cursing isn’t enough. Etching the walls with threats isn’t enough. Holmes’s idea

was to write. To rebuild himself on paper, one word at a time.

“I made this pact with myself,” he says. “I was going to write something every day. I didn’t care what it was.” If he could get paper in the hole, that is; you might as well ask for caviar. That is how the hole can destroy you. It takes away everything, everything except that which you dearly wish to be rid of: your memories.

Except Holmes isn’t like other inmates. And now he proves it, rising from the cement and calling for the guard. When the guard finally comes, Holmes asks him for the one book he hasn’t read yet.

“What do you want a handbook for?” the guard asks. But he gives Holmes the handbook. That’s the second best thing about the inmate handbook: They can’t deny you one if you ask. The first best thing? The paper is printed on only one side.

**Mike approached from behind. He dropped a T-shirt over the old man’s face and throat and demanded to know where the money was. That was when Holmes realized that the situation was beyond his control.**

someone else. Mike pulled the old man onto the floor and threatened to kill him. The old man cried out. And then came an even worse sound: a woman's voice, thin, rising, quickened by fright.

**AT ONCE THE FULL HORROR OF WHAT** he had done became clear. He had been violent in the past, but there are different kinds of violence. There is violence that rises in response to violence. And then there is violence like this, which intrudes savagely and unprovoked on the very hearth of innocence.

Holmes almost panicked at the repugnance of his own culpability. *Why did I let myself do this?* This is the first of the questions that will torture him in the hole, ballooning over him like a putrid cloud, vast and irremediable. His only hope was to limit the damage, to find the woman who called out and prevent her from meeting Mike.

Just then she stepped into the hall, an arm's length away, a naked 70-year-old woman straight from her bath. She gaped at him. Her look of terror will ingale Royal Holmes forever, a living excruciation. To know that you are the cause of this terror. To observe the unbridgeable gulf between the man you thought you were and the man reflected in the eyes of another. To know in your heart that her perception is truer than your own.

The sound of the shotgun butt striking bone. Holmes's world engaged again. He took the woman by the arms and hustled her into the bedroom. He told her to lie on the floor. He rummaged frantically through a dresser, looking for some way to restrain her. Just stay here, he said. His mind raced. If he could locate the money, then maybe Mike would leave without killing anyone. But she says they don't have any money.

Too late. Mike burst in, shoving the man with the shotgun. The man's head was streaming with blood. *What the fuck are you doing?* But Mike had the gun and therefore the power. Holmes felt the gun trained on him as he left the bedroom, grabbed the car keys off the kitchen counter, and banged out the door. He was expecting to bear a shot, or to be shot himself. A second later he was cranking the ignition of the couple's Pontiac when the passenger door opened and Mike got in.

There is no escape. There is no escaping this, ever.

**"NO MATTER HOW YOU LOOK AT IT, THAT** stuff is always going to hurt," Holmes says. "Every side you turn, there's an ugly picture. I'm just trying to make the picture right." Today, Holmes gives talks to kids about his experience. The church that put on a play about his life is flying him around the country to help spread his message. He trains people for free when they can't afford it, and offers a faint glow of hope for the men he knew in prison, men who watch his YouTube training videos on smuggled cellphones. If prison has

taught Holmes anything, it's that humanity withers in the absence of hope.

And that application on which he didn't have to check the box? LA Fitness; he was hired. He eventually told his story to his boss, Bianca Porter. She says she still would have hired him: "I saw that he had a true passion for training people, and he took it seriously.

"I saw his true nature, I saw his compassion," she says. "So despite what he's gone through, that's only made him a better person and helped him to appreciate the simple things. And that shows in his workouts."

His job interview involved a workout; he was hired on the spot. He stuck with what he knew, designing simple workouts for clients: chinups, pushups, crunches—basic moves amid the glittering machines. "Because he brought something new," Porter says, "every new person I signed up, I definitely teamed them up with him." Clients are happy. Holmes is busy improving people's lives, she says. Almost too busy to see the irony in that.

"I love to train. I love what I do," he says. "I love to be able to do it and get paid for it. So I would say I'm happy."

You don't have to forgive him. There's no reason you should, since he doesn't forgive himself. For some things we do not have the power to forgive, however much we pretend. Prison is just one aspect of this pretense, a way to claim that if a man serves his time, then his "debt" has been "paid."

But true evil is inoperable. The look on a 70-year-old woman's face as she steps from the shower to find you in her home is inoperable; there is no excising it. The most you can do is wall it off, try not to let it keep you from aspiring to do better. This is the quandary Holmes lives with today. Owning up to the past while refusing to let it destroy him. Planning for the future while denying himself true absolution.

His is the strain of being two men at once. He can't delete one of these men, he can't delete his deeds. The presence of that man would be unbearable were it not for the existence of the other man, the one who stands before us now, fully present and determined never to succumb even when the obstacles he faces include the man that he once was.

"It happened 12 years ago," he says, quietly. "I cannot let it beat me. Only way I can beat it is to transform it into something else."

As for what we think, in the end it doesn't matter. Because when you're rebuilding yourself from nothing, you simply can't afford to give a damn what anyone else thinks. You either move forward, or you perish. The opinions of others don't enter the picture.

He has given up his homemade studio, and that was hard. "I put a lot into it," he says.

And he moves forward. For he has already taken to heart the propulsive words of W.E.B. Du Bois, which he had painted on the wall of his studio barely 7 months earlier.

"Be ready at any moment to give up what you are for what you might become." ■

at the first pitch, and only swung at about 40 percent of the pitches he saw in 2012. Only 12 major leaguers were more finicky at the plate.

"They usually throw that first-pitch fastball right down the middle, and I just take it," he says. On subsequent pitches, he waits longer than most hitters before starting his swing. "That's my approach: just staying back, not being jumpy, seeing it before you hit it."

His family is a priority, maybe as a relief from the hoopla surrounding him. On the day we got together, Trout had just returned from vacation in Key West. His mother, Debbie, dropped in on the photo shoot and regaled us with stories of Mike's big catch—a goliath grouper, estimated by their captain to be 500 pounds. He had to call to the bullpen for relief—unusual for an outfielder. "He said, 'Help me, I'm cramping up!'" Debbie told us. Trout's brother and father helped reel it in.

That's right: A school of Trout landed a giant grouper. Just add it to the legend. ■

his opponents. In the game, he tries to narrow his thought process: "I just go up there trying to look for one pitch in my zone that I can handle."

Another constant: strength training. "I love to train," he says. "Always have." His father was an ironworker, helping to build some of the landmark hotels and casinos in Vegas. "He worked his butt off every single day and still got in the gym. He made me want to be like him, to be strong and work hard."

That hard work began with body-weight exercises. "I was probably 12 or 13 when I started doing pushups, situps, dips," says Harper. From there he graduated to conventional lifting, focusing on basic, heavy lifts, such as squats and power cleans.

Harper also saw a link between the quality of his diet and his future success. "I like eating the right way, doing things the right way. I never had to have my dad come and say, 'Hey, you have to get back to the gym' or, 'Hey, you're eating wrong.'" The rookie came prepared. ■

**WHERE TO BUY** "The Perfect Trench Coat," pp. 88-92

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| Alternative Apparel<br>alternativeapparel.com | Sant Rigger<br>gant.com                 |
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| BOSS<br>bossusa.com                           | J.Crew<br>jccrew.com                    |
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