



# Dealers

by Peter Madsen

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# DEALERS

By **Peter Madsen**

Cover art by **Christy Karacas**

## PREFACE

The story behind this collection of anonymous interviews with New York City drug dealers, which I conducted during the last half of 2012 and early 2013, begins four years earlier, when I was laid off from a media company I had moved to New York to work for. Then in my mid 20s, outgrowing youth culture yet lacking any genuine perspective of my own (and, therefore, anything worth writing about), I bought a \$100 bike on Bedford Avenue (*ahem*) and did a lot of riding around. I so much loved exploring New York City on two wheels I eventually took up work as a messenger. Few other occupations (save perhaps cab driving, high-rise window-washing, or—yikes—being a cop) can so efficiently introduce someone to the humanity that resides in New York City.

After months of riding without writing I itched to publish again but I was still unsure of what I had to offer. Instead of straining to be just another blogger, I decided to leave the observations to others: mostly panhandlers. When someone asked if I could spare a buck, I'd instead offer \$10 for a snapshot and a quick interview about a sometimes observational yet invariably simple, humanist topic: "Why do you have tattoos on your face?" "What's the most difficult thing you've explained to a child?" "Can wife-beaters be good people?" Thus began *Word on the Street*

New York dot com, where I've archived over 250 such interviews with people whose words always defy expectations.

It was this project that caught the attention of powerHouse Books, and while they passed on "WotSNY" (hey, they have first option hereafter) they did take interest in some people I would incidentally interview now and again: dealers. While *Dealers* retains the same conversational tone of WotSNY, the subjects and I aren't rushed by my need to get to my next pick up; instead we have the time to let the interactions take us where they might. As an interviewer I'm enduringly interested in the subject as the ultimate authority on his experience, and I think one's attention to detail may be that much more acute when his daily existence depends on an illegal, stigmatized, and consequently very secretive trade. For that, I was gratified to find that my subjects' need to speak to and be understood by people who live outside (but not above) this underworld was pronounced. After many late-hour meet ups, a few obligatory transactions (OK, not *that* obligatory), and several days-worth of audio later (the iPhone 4S is a great voice recorder), I am very pleased to present the following 15 interviews with people whom, for worse or perhaps much better, are "dealers."

Peter Madsen

# MIGUEL

34, Flatiron



## Are you a drug dealer?

Ah, no. I'm a concierge at a large luxury building.

## Oh. So do you know any drug dealers?

Drug dealers who go through here? Yeah. You can tell a drug dealer when he comes in. Personally, a lot of my friends are dealers. You can tell with escorts, as well.

## And you let them in?

Of course! It's a matter of someone having invited a guest and my letting him upstairs. I mean, of course I will call the tenant and announce the person. But that's it. I'm not here to judge people. Here's how you can tell a drug dealer: If you have a

tenant who is kind of a preppy guy and his friend's décor is very "urban," you can just tell they're not really friends-friends. He comes and goes within five minutes and you know what obviously happened. It's not like a doorman is blind to it.

## You're saying you can tell they sell drugs by judging their appearance?

Pretty much.

## Do dealers who specialize in certain drugs dress in certain ways?

Well, yeah. A lot of weed dealers appear as bike messengers, for example. Or you'll have a guy—I don't know how to best put this in PC terms—who comes from an "urban background."

## You mean a black or Spanish ghetto?

A black or Spanish ghetto. And they'll wear hip-hop gear. Usually those are the guys who are selling *that*.

## Cocaine.

Yeah, and they dress like they're from the Bronx or something.

## So these weed messengers always wear bags?

They always have bags and they always have that look that's perhaps less a bike-messenger look as an I-live-in-Williamsburg look. Of course, it's a whole different ballgame when it comes to synthetics. That doesn't really happen so much around here.

## Synthetics?

You know, like OxyContin. That's more private. But when it comes to dealers coming in on the regular, yeah, you notice them.

## Do the guys who sell coke wear bags?

No, no. Rarely will they carry anything at all. I mean, there's not too much for them to carry anyway. They just come in nonchalant.

### **How do they regard you?**

For the most part they're OK. They don't want to bring trouble to themselves. Actually, it's good you brought that up. I would say with the bike messengers, those guys are a lot more respectful. They know how to play the game. With the coke guys, I think because their world is more intense, sometimes they'll get frustrated when I stop them and call the resident first—but that practice is standard. I mean, that's what our job is. But for the most part, they're OK.

### **Is their world more intense because of the greater consequences for getting caught with coke?**

It's a matter of what that world does to you. Because it's coke, you get more of a high-octane energy off them. Not just from the dealer, but from the residents who are into that stuff as well. The dealers are that much more *tense*.

### **Are certain hours busier than others?**

You rarely see these guys during the day, but once the sun goes down, that's it. That's when you start seeing them. During the holidays I get a lot more, too. It's the holiday anxieties that bring it on. Between work—everyone's trying to get everything done before the end of the year—you've got Christmas gifts... It's all this crap that comes along with it. And what also comes with all of that is a lot more partying. People party *a lot harder* during the holidays.

### **Do you think non-drug-ordering residents recognize the dealers as such?**

No, no. They wouldn't even notice at all.

### **That someone who comes from a different background is coming into their luxury building?**

No, because there's always a lot of guest traffic of different backgrounds. Especially here in New York City where everything is so international and cluttered with every type of culture and class. If anything they'll probably be upset—OK, maybe not *upset*—that they're sharing an elevator with someone who is

living in a low-income apartment. That's probably how they would view them.

### **Why doesn't the NYPD just wait outside luxury buildings and stop the people who don't fit in?**

It would be complicated for a cop. First of all, it would be illegal. Let's suppose it's your apartment, and you're inviting your "guest" over. The cop didn't see any transaction or exchange. He would have nothing to go on.

### **What if a cop detains a drug dealer as he leaves the building and he wants to question you about the guy?**

I would tell him that the man just went upstairs as an invited guest. That's all. Again, I am not one to judge who goes upstairs and what goes on in anyone's apartment. Whatever you do in your apartment is your business. You could bring up sheep, for Christ's sake.

### **I'm sure there a law against that. How often do residents ask you if you "know a guy"? Do you put them in touch?**

Yeah, of course. All the time. Some people are too embarrassed or they already know someone. But a couple times a week there are some people who ask me and I will connect them with my friends. Or my friends' friends.

### **What time of day do people ask? How do they appear?**

After they feel comfortable with me they open up. I don't see anything wrong with [referring them to drug dealers]; granted, it's illegal, but at the same time, people are going to find it sooner or later, some way, some how. So why not help one friend make money and help another be happy? I'm just the middleman. That's all.

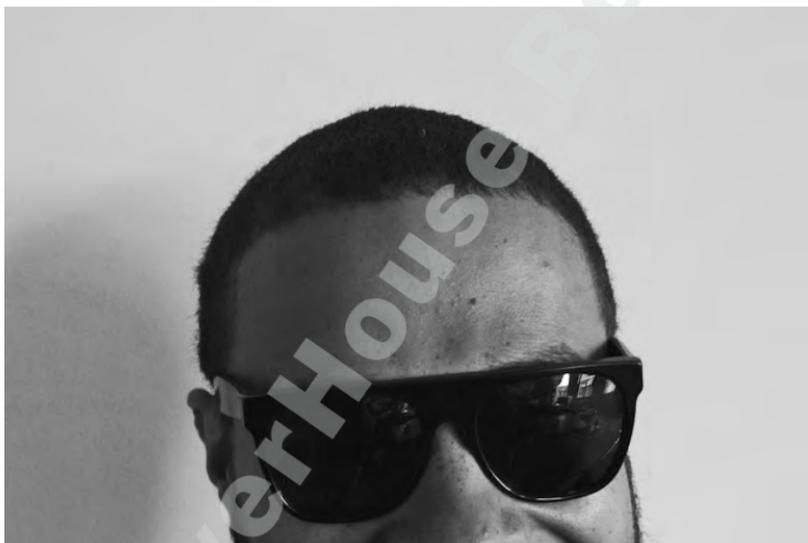
### **You're the connect.**

That's right.

### **So you know a guy for pot?**

# CHICO 117

30s, Harlem



**How long have you been selling drugs?**

[Laughs very hard.] Oh god, off and on since I was 17.

**Do your parents know you sell drugs?**

Yes. [Laughs.]

**Are they upset?**

No.

**Why not?**

My father was a hustler, so whatever.

### **What did he hustle?**

Weed, same shit as me.

### **Did you grow up aware of this?**

Yeah, fully aware. My dad used to sell pounds. There would be like a pound in the living room at all times.

### **Just hanging out on the coffee table?**

Yeah, he used to smoke mad weed and there would be mad scales around.

### **How old were you when you figured out all this was remarkable?**

When I was in kindergarten I knew what was going on and knew I wasn't supposed to talk about it. When I went to other people's houses, it wasn't like that. [Laughs.] My dad had money and shit, we had money growing up. Had a car, a duplex apartment.

### **What kind of car?**

My pops had a Honda, it was no big deal. We lived in Spanish Harlem, Uptown in Manhattan, and not everybody had a car—maybe ten in the building.

### **How did you know not to talk about this stuff with your friends?**

My parents never hid shit from me. They would tell me that I'm not supposed to tell people because it's illegal and we'd get in trouble for it—but that's how we eat. [Laughs.]

### **So if someone asked what your dad did, what would you say?**

A fisherman. [Laughs.]

### **A fisherman?**

He used to work on shrimp boats and shit, but I guess he found a connect and stopped.

### **He was living in Harlem and would go shrimping?**

He would go away for months and come back. We'd get giant boxes of shrimp in dry ice sent to the house.

### **Is your dad a big, brawny guy?**

[Laughs.] No, he is a fucking pretty boy! I don't even understand how he did shit like that. It's weird, I try to be like him all the time.

### **You do?**

Yeah, good looking and manly. [Laughs.] Like having nice clothes, but you can change a flat and build a house basically.

### **So did your dad ever get in trouble?**

He got locked up in Alabama for transporting weed. He had a bunch of pounds in the trunk and got pulled over. He did a year in jail for that. He would write me letters all the time.

### **Were you mad at him for going to jail?**

I wasn't mad because he was in jail; I was mad because he wasn't here.

### **Did he encourage you to sell weed, too?**

Basically, yeah. I remember when I was 14 my dad was living in New Mexico. I was talking with him on the phone, and I told him I'm trying to get a summer job. He was like, "You can go see your uncle and work at the gate in Brooklyn." I didn't even know what the fuck that was. I went to go see my uncle, and it was basically a weed gate in Clinton Hill that I would have worked behind.

### **What's a gate?**

That's what they call that shit, that's an old-school term for

# ALEX

31, East Village



## Do strangers ever ask you for drugs?

Yes, they do in fact. I don't think they ever think I'm the drug dealer, because if I was I wouldn't be on the street panhandling, but I think they assume—and, generally, they are correct—that I'm strung-out and in a tough situation, and that if they buy me something to get straight, I'll take care of them.

## Who are these people who ask you to buy them heroin?

You would never pick them out on the street as being drug addicts. It makes me think of myself when I've been in new cities after I've been clean for years and then I fuck up.... You would never know I was a junky. These people totally look like clean-cut college kids, or some hipster types, or whatever. They'll come up and they'll be all sketched out and say, "Look, ah, I was

just wondering if you, ah—*know where to get dope?*” [Chuckles.] I run them through a battery of questions and I feel them out.

### **What do you ask?**

I’ve heard conflicting things about this, but apparently the one standard thing you ask is if the person is a cop or if they have anything to do with the cops. I heard that it can ruin a case against you if you are directly asking, “Are you a police officer or working for the police?” and they mislead you.\* That being said, the cops could just lie in court since it’s my word against theirs. Anyway, so I ask the person things and I watch their body language, their eye contact, and I determine whether to take a chance on them. A lot of it, too, has to do with how desperate I am. In the past there have been times when I was really sick and I took a chance even though I didn’t have a good feeling about it. I’ve never had a problem; I’ve been lucky.

### **What’s your finder’s fee?**

It depends on the person asking. I’m probably the least greedy, best person you’d hope to buy your dope. If they’re getting three \$10-bags I’m only going to expect one. If we’re staying in the Lower East Side, which is quick and convenient, a bundle is \$90. (I know where to get a bundle for \$50 or \$60—which is a really good hook-up—but we’d have to go uptown.) But the rate is not a set-in-stone thing. I’ve also had people say they would split everything right down the middle with me, and I’ll be like, “Oh, that’s too nice, don’t worry about it. Whatever.”

### **So you leave your panhandling spot and go to your heroin dealer?**

Sometimes I get the customer to just wait with my shit—a ratty-looking bag filled with blankets and things I need to survive—but usually they insist on coming with. I make it clear to them they can follow me but only from what I call a “running distance” where, if I suddenly bolt, they’d have a fighting chance to catch me. Another thing I always make clear is that I am dealing with someone who knows me and trusts me; if they were to roll up in the middle of the deal, it would make me look bad and it would probably kill the deal. Even if it doesn’t, I will just give you your money back.

\* According to *Police Field Operations* by Thomas F. Adams, this is a common misconception people have. Cops can lie; the case stands.

### **Do you ever catch any attitude?**

People can be a bit grouchy because we’re dealing with their money and even if they’re not sick they’ve gotten themselves so worked up with anticipation. You know, these people coming up to me for dope aren’t doing dope for the first time. They probably haven’t done it for a while, and they may have struggled with addiction, so when they get it again their hands are shaking—they just can’t wait to get it inside them.

### **You just divvy it up on the spot?**

Well, when I get the dope from my guy I take out my cut right away so there isn’t any chance of the customer trying to negotiate our deal after the fact. If there is some problem, the customer knows where to find me, and we go our separate ways. I try to be as quick about this as possible because this is a business-thing—I want to get back to my [panhandling] spot so I can keep making money, or so someone else can come up to me for dope. A lot of times, also, the customers are rarely outfitted with rigs and all the gear they need, so I usually provide that as well.

### **They’ll take needles from you, a perfect stranger?**

Well, it comes in a sealed package. Also, I’m pretty good at making small talk as I walk there and I’m pretty good at putting people at ease. I think people can tell pretty quickly that I’m not a scumbag. Honestly, I’ve never ripped anybody off out here; I have a really gold name. There are some other people who have some not-so-great names, but I’m known as a man of his word. When I was still using, I had a lot of customers who supported my habit. After a couple times dealing with me, people would get comfortable enough that I’d tell them to just meet me at the park, I’d be there.

### **Which park was your preferred meet up spot?**

The spot over the summer was the East River Park, by the entrance on 6th Street. There’s a bathroom right there where everybody shoots up because it’s right where everybody picks up in the projects and you just have to go across the bridge. Sometimes people race across because they’re all anxious and

# KRAMER

32, Williamsburg



**Do you like being a drug dealer?**

Whoa, right out the gate! Let me think on this one.

**OK, so to back up a bit: you work for a marijuana delivery service. How long have you worked?**

I've worked four days a week for the past five years, with no time off except for a week when I go to Puerto Rico. I call in sick about once a year, maybe twice. Sometimes I wake up an hour late, but I'm never too hungover to get on my bike and bust my ass. When that happens I worry the shit out of my boss because, since I'm usually so reliable, he assumes the worst—that I got arrested or hit by a car—and calls 311.

**Not unlike a real job.**

This is as real a job as any others I've worked, which is something I end up having to explain to friends: I work certain hours on certain days, and when we're hanging out outside that time frame I am not going to have weed on me to sell, just because my day-job is selling weed. You might as well be asking your friend who works at Wendy's for a cheeseburger when you're at the beach.

**You're not the kind of pot dealer whose identity seems tied up with the trade and the stereotypical, 420/stoner culture. No Phish t-shirts or tie-dye in the rotation, I take it.**

[Laughs.] Yeah, definitely not. I don't think I would know a Phish song if I heard it, to be honest. Although we're paid on commission, I essentially clock in and out. When I'm not working I really like walking around knowing that I could be stopped and frisked and not go to central booking.

**Have you been stopped and frisked?**

Twice actually, even though I'm white—don't think you have to be black or Latino to know firsthand how fucked up and scary it is to get run up on by plainclothes. Essentially you're getting jumped by thugs with guns who kidnap you for a while and will hurt you if you protest too loudly. And they take your weed and money, so it's a robbery.

**Tell me about the first time you were stopped and frisked.**

I was on the Upper East Side while I was working and I got arrested and booked. The stop was completely illegal. The other time I wasn't even working, I was in the back of a black Town Car, which the cops pulled over. They only questioned me, told me to get out of the car, and frisked me. Luckily I didn't give myself up; I had a used one-hitter in my pocket. Technically in a stop and frisk cops can't fish in your pockets for anything that doesn't resemble a weapon, but they can try to sweat the shit out of you by repeatedly asking you to show them anything illegal you have on you. Because I know my rights I walked away that night.

**So do you like being a drug dealer?**

Hmm. OK, I have to make a distinction between being a "drug dealer" and selling weed, because while I do do that in Manhattan, I resent the stigma. I'm grateful for the job, though, since the unemployment rate is still so high. There are people who would want to slit my throat for not working a job where I get a great workout on a bicycle for \$200 to \$400 on really insane days, paid in cash at the end of every day. I keep the money inside the turkey bag with the weed and it absorbs the smell. I once bought a couch at a furniture store with cash and the woman clerk started blushing. She was like, "Hey, Omar, come smell this money; it has a nice fragrance!"

**That's cute.**

I was uncomfortable. It took luck for me to be offered this job and balls to take it. But talk to me in a month's time and I might be crippled because a drunk driver hit me and took off.

**—Or in jail.**

Or in jail, I guess, but when most people say "jail" they mean central booking instead of Riker's.

**What makes you think you wouldn't go to Riker's?**

My boss pretty much guaranteed we'd never do jail time for working for him, even if the feds were working this whole time to build a case against him.

**How do you know you wouldn't be included?**

I've asked my boss about that and he said that maybe initially our names would be included in the investigation but he said he would have his lawyer take care of it, and that runners would never do jail time.

**But how do you know that for certain?**

OK, I don't know that for certain, but my boss does have a really good criminal defense attorney on retainer. I could tell you his name and you would probably have heard of him.

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