ONE

How Does It Feel to Be Black and Poor?

During my first weeks at the University of Chicago, in the fall of 1989, I had to attend a variety of orientation sessions. In each one, after the particulars of the session had been dispensed with, we were warned not to walk outside the areas that were actively patrolled by the university's police force. We were handed detailed maps that outlined where the small enclave of Hyde Park began and ended: this was the safe area. Even the lovely parks across the border were off-limits, we were told, unless you were traveling with a large group or attending a formal event.

It turned out that the ivory tower was also an ivory fortress. I lived on the southwestern edge of Hyde Park, where the university housed a lot of its graduate students. I had a studio apartment in a ten-story building just off Cottage Grove Avenue, a historic boundary between Hyde Park and Woodlawn, a poor black neighborhood. The contrast would be familiar to anyone who has spent time around

an urban university in the United States. On one side of the divide lay a beautifully manicured Gothic campus, with privileged students, most of them white, walking to class and playing sports. On the other side were down-and-out African Americans offering cheap labor and services (changing oil, washing windows, selling drugs) or panhandling on street corners.

I didn't have many friends, so in my spare time I started taking long walks, getting to know the city. For a budding sociologist, the streets of Chicago were a feast. I was intrigued by the different ethnic neighborhoods, the palpable sense of culture and tradition. I liked that there was one part of the city, Rogers Park, where Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis congregated. Unlike the lily-white suburbs of Southern California where I'd grown up, the son of immigrants from South Asia, here Indians seemed to have a place in the ethnic landscape along with everyone else.

I was particularly interested in the poor black neighborhoods surrounding the university. These were neighborhoods where nearly half the population didn't work, where crime and gang activity were said to be entrenched, where the welfare rolls were swollen. In the late 1980s, these isolated parts of the inner cities gripped the nation's attention. I went for many walks there and started playing basketball in the parks, but I didn't see any crime, and I didn't feel particularly threatened. I wondered why the university kept warning students to keep out.

As it happened, I attracted a good bit of curiosity from the locals. Perhaps it was because these parks didn't attract many nonblack visitors, or perhaps it was because in those days I dressed like a Deadhead. I got asked a lot of questions about India—most of which I couldn't answer, since I'd moved to the States as a child. Sometimes I'd come upon a picnic, and people would offer me some of their

soul food. They were puzzled when I turned them down on the grounds that I was a vegetarian.

But as alien as I was to these folks, they were just as alien to me.

As part of my heavy course load at the U of C, I began attending seminars where professors parsed the classic sociological questions: How do an individual's preferences develop? Can we predict human behavior? What are the long-term consequences, for instance, of education on future generations?

The standard mode of answering these questions was to conduct widespread surveys and then use complex mathematical methods to analyze the survey data. This would produce statistical snapshots meant to predict why a given person might, say, fail to land a job, or end up in prison, or have a child out of wedlock. It was thought that the key to formulating good policy was to first formulate a good scientific study.

I liked the questions these researchers were asking, but compared with the vibrant life that I saw on the streets of Chicago, the discussion in these seminars seemed cold and distant, abstract and lifeless. I found it particularly curious that most of these researchers didn't seem interested in meeting the people they wrote about. It wasn't necessarily out of any animosity—nearly all of them were well intentioned—but because the act of actually talking to research subjects was seen as messy, unscientific, and a potential source of bias.

Mine was not a new problem. Indeed, the field of sociology had long been divided into two camps: those who use quantitative and statistical techniques and those who study life by direct observation, often living among a group of people.

This second group, usually called ethnographers, use their first-

hand approach to answer a particular sort of question: How do people survive in marginal communities? for instance, or What makes a government policy work well for some families and not for others?

The quantitative sociologists, meanwhile, often criticized the ethnographers' approach. They argued that it isn't nearly scientific enough and that the answers may be relevant only to the particular group under observation. In other words, to reach any important and generalizable conclusion, you need to rely on the statistical analyses of large data sets like the U.S. Census or other massive surveys.

My frustration with the more scientific branch of sociology hadn't really coalesced yet. But I knew that I wanted to do something other than sit in a classroom all day and talk mathematics.

So I did what any sensible student who was interested in race and poverty would do: I walked down the hallway and knocked on the door of William Julius Wilson, the most eminent living scholar on the subject and the most prominent African American in the field of sociology. He had been teaching at the U of C for nearly twenty years and had published two books that reshaped how scholars and policy makers thought about urban poverty.

I caught Wilson just in time—he was about to go to Paris for a sabbatical. But he was also about to launch a new research project, he said, and I could participate if I liked.

Wilson was a quiet, pensive man, dressed in a dark blue suit. Although he had stopped smoking his trademark pipe long ago, he still looked like the kind of professor you see in movies. If you asked him a question, he'd often let several long moments of silence pass—he could be more than a little bit intimidating—before offering a thoughtful response.

Wilson explained that he was hoping to better understand how young blacks were affected by specific neighborhood factors: Did growing up as a poor kid in a housing project, for instance, lead to

worse educational and job outcomes than if a similarly poor kid grew up outside the projects? What about the difference between growing up in a neighborhood that was surrounded by other poor areas and growing up poor but near an affluent neighborhood? Did the latter group take advantage of the schools, services, and employment opportunities in the richer neighborhoods?

Wilson's project was still in the planning stages. The first step was to construct a basic survey questionnaire, and he suggested I help his other graduate students in figuring out which questions to ask. This meant going back to earlier studies of black youth to see what topics and questions had been chosen by earlier sociologists. Wilson gave me a box of old questionnaires. I should experiment, he said, by borrowing some of their questions and developing new ones as needed. Sociologists liked to use survey questions that their peers had already used, I learned, in order to produce comparable results. This was a key part of the scientific method in sociology.

I thanked Wilson and went to the library to begin looking over the questionnaires he'd given me. I quickly realized I had no idea how to interview anyone.

Washington Park, situated just across Cottage Grove Avenue from the U of C, is one of Chicago's stateliest parks. Designed in the 1870s by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it has a beautiful swimming pool, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, dazzling flower gardens, and long, winding paths that crisscross its nearly four hundred acres. I liked to go running on the clay track that encircled the park, a track that decades earlier had hosted horse and auto races. Until the 1940s the surrounding neighborhood was mainly Irish, but when black families started buying homes nearby, most of the white families moved away. I was always surprised that

the university actively dissuaded its students from spending time in Washington Park. I failed to see the danger, at least in the daylight.

After my run I sometimes stopped by the broad, marshy lagoon in the middle of the park. The same group of old black men, usually a half dozen or so, congregated there every day—playing cards, drinking beer, fishing for bass and perch in the lagoon. I sat and listened to them for hours. To this point I had had little exposure to African-American culture at all, and no experience whatsoever in an urban ghetto. I had moved to Chicago just a year earlier from California, where I'd attended a predominantly white college situated on the beach, UC San Diego.

I had been reading several histories of Chicago's black community, and I sometimes asked these men about the events and people of which I'd read. The stories they told were considerably more animated than the history in the books. They knew the intricacies of machine politics—whom you had to befriend, for instance, to get a job or a building permit. They talked about the Black Panther Party of their youth and how it was radically different from today's gangs. "The Panthers had breakfast programs for kids, but these gangs just shoot 'em and feed 'em drugs," one man lamented. I already knew a bit about how the Panthers operated in Chicago during the civil-rights era. What little I knew about modern gangs, however, came from the movies and newspapers—and, of course, the constant cautions issued by the U of C about steering clear of certain neighborhoods.

I was particularly intrigued by the old men's views on race, which boiled down to this: Whites and blacks would never be able to talk openly, let alone live together. The most talkative among them was Leonard Combs, a.k.a. Old Time. "Never trust a white man," he told me one day, "and don't think black folk are any better."

Old Time came to Washington Park every day with his fishing

gear, lunch, and beer. He wore a tired beige fishing hat, and he had lost so many teeth that his gums smacked together when he spoke. But he loved to talk, especially about Chicago.

"We live in a city within a city," he said. "They have theirs and we have ours. And if you can understand that it will never change, you'll start understanding how this city works."

"You mean whites and blacks will never get along?" I asked.

A man named Charlie Butler jumped in. "You got two kinds of whites in this city," he said, "and two kinds of blacks. You got whites who'll beat you if you come into their neighborhood. They live around Bridgeport and on the Southwest Side. Then you got another group that just won't invite you in. They'll call the police if you come in their neighborhood—like where *you* live, in Hyde Park. And the police *will* beat you up."

Charlie was a retired factory worker, a beefy man with tattooed, well-developed arms, a college football star from long ago. Charlie sometimes came to Hyde Park for breakfast or lunch at one of the diners where other blacks hung out, but he never stayed past sundown and he never walked on residential streets, he said, since the police would follow him.

"What about blacks?" I asked.

"You got blacks who are beating their heads trying to figure out a way to live where *you* live!" Charlie continued. "Don't ask me why. And then you got a whole lot of black folk who realize it ain't no use. Like us. We just spend our time trying to get by, and we live around here, where it ain't so pretty, but at least you won't get your ass beat. At least not by the police."

"That's how it's been since black folk came to the city," Old Time said, "and it's not going to change."

"You mean you don't have *any* white friends?" I asked.

"You have any *black* friends?" Old Time countered with a sly

grin. I didn't need to answer. "And you may want to ask your professors if *they* have any," he said, clearly pleased with his rebuke.

From these conversations I started to gain a bit of perspective on what it was like to be black in Chicago. The overriding sentiment was that given how the city operated, there was little chance for any significant social progress.

This kind of fatalism was foreign to me. When you grew up in affluent Southern California, even for someone as politically disengaged as I, there was a core faith in the workings of American institutions and a sustaining belief that people can find a way to resolve their differences, even racial ones. I was now beginning to see the limits of my narrow experience. Nearly every conversation with Old Time and his friends wound up at the intersection of politics and race. I couldn't follow all the nuances of their arguments, especially when it came to local politics, but even I could see the huge gap between how they perceived the world and how sociologists presented the life of urban poor people.

One day I asked Old Time and his friends if they'd be willing to let me interview them for Professor Wilson's survey. They agreed, and I tried for a few days. But I felt I wasn't getting anywhere. Most of the conversations ended up meandering along, a string of interruptions and half-finished thoughts.

Charlie could see I was dejected. "Before you give up," he said, "you should probably speak to the people who you really want to talk to—*young* men, not us. That's the only way you're going to get what you need."

So I set out looking for young black men. At the U of C library, I checked the census records to find a tract with poor black families with people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four.

The Lake Park projects looked good, at least on paper, and I randomly chose Building Number 4040, highlighting on my census printout the apartments where young people lived. Those were the doors I'd be knocking on. Old Time told me that I could go any day I wanted. "Most black folk in the projects don't work," he said, "so they don't have nowhere else to be." Still, I thought a weekend would be the best time to find a lot of people.

On a brisk Saturday afternoon in November, I went looking for 4040 South Lake Park, one of several high-rise projects in Oakland, a lakefront neighborhood about two miles north of the U of C. Oakland was one of the poorest communities in Chicago, with commensurately high rates of unemployment, welfare, and crime. Its population was overwhelmingly black, dating back to the early-twentieth-century southern migration. The neighborhood surrounding the Lake Park projects wasn't much of a neighborhood at all. There were few people on the streets, and on some blocks there were more vacant lots than buildings. Aside from a few liquor stores and broken-down bodegas, there wasn't much commerce. It struck me that most housing projects, even though they are built in cities, run counter to the very notion of urban living. Cities are attractive because of their balkanized variety: wandering the streets of a good city, you can see all sorts of highs and lows, commerce and recreation, a multitude of ethnicities and just as many expressions of public life. But housing projects, at least from the outside, seemed to be a study in joyless monotony, the buildings clustered tightly together but set apart from the rest of the city, as if they were toxic.

Up close, the buildings looked like tall checkerboards, their dull yellow-brick walls lined with rows of dreary windows. A few of the windows revealed the aftermath of an apartment fire, black smudges spreading upward in the shape of tombstones. Most of the buildings had only one entrance, and it was usually clogged with young people.

By now I was used to being observed carefully when I walked around a black neighborhood. Today was no different. As I approached one of the Lake Park projects, five or six young men stared me down. It should be said here that I probably deserved to be stared at. I was just a few months removed from a long stretch of time I'd spent following the Grateful Dead, and I was still under the spell of Jerry Garcia and his band of merrymakers. With my ponytail and tie-dyed shirt, I must have looked pretty out of place. I tended to speak in spiritually laden language, mostly about the power of road trips; the other grad students in my department saw me as a bit naïve and more than a little loopy. Looking back, I can't say they were wrong.

But I wasn't so naïve that I couldn't recognize what was going on in the lobby of the building that I now approached. Customers were arriving, black and white, by car and on foot, hurrying inside to buy their drugs and then hurrying back out. I wasn't sure if this building was Number 4040, and I couldn't find the number anywhere, so I just walked inside. The entryway smelled of alcohol, soot, and urine. Young men stood and crouched on plastic milk crates, a couple of them stomping their feet against the cold. I put my head down, took a breath, and walked past them quickly.

Their eyes felt heavy on me as I passed by. One huge young man, six foot six at least, chose not to move an inch as I passed. I brushed up against him and nearly lost my balance.

There was a long row of beaten-up metal mailboxes, many of them missing their doors. Water was dripping everywhere, puddling on the ground. Shouts and shrieks cascaded down from the higher floors, making the whole building feel like some kind of vibrating catacomb.

Once I got past the entryway, it was darker. I could make out the elevator, but I seemed to be losing any peripheral vision, and I couldn't find the button. I sensed that I was still being watched and

that I ought to press the button fast, but I groped around in vain. Then I started looking for the stairwell, but I couldn't find that either. To my left was a large barrier of some kind, but I was too nervous to go around it. To my right was a corridor. I decided to go that way, figuring I'd come across a stairwell or at least a door to knock on. As I turned, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

"What's up, my man, you got some business in here?" He was in his twenties, about as tall and dark as I was. His voice was deep and forceful but matter-of-fact, as if he asked the same question regularly. He wore baggy jeans, a loose-fitting jacket, and a baseball cap. His earrings sparkled, as did the gold on his front teeth. A few other young men, dressed the same, stood behind him.

I told them that I was there to interview families.

"No one lives here," he said.

"I'm doing a study for the university," I said, "and I have to go to Apartments 610 and 703."

"Ain't nobody lived in those apartments for the longest," he said.

"Well, do you mind if I just run up there and knock on the door?"

"Yeah, we do mind," he said.

I tried again. "Maybe I'm in the wrong building. Is this 4040?"

He shook his head. "No one lives here. So you won't be talking to anybody."

I decided I'd better leave. I walked back through the lobby, bag and clipboard in hand. I crossed in front of the building, over an expansive patch of dead grass littered with soda cans and broken glass. I turned around and looked back at the building. A great many of the windows were lit. I wondered why my new friend had insisted that the building was uninhabited. Only later did I learn that gang members routinely rebuffed all sorts of visitors with this line: "No one by that name lives here." They would try to prevent social work-

ers, schoolteachers, and maintenance personnel from coming inside and interrupting their drug trade.

The young men from the building were still watching me, but they didn't follow. As I came upon the next high-rise, I saw the faint markings on the pale yellow brick: Number 4040. At least now I was in the right place. The lobby here was empty, so I quickly skirted past another set of distressed mailboxes and passed through another dank lobby. The elevator was missing entirely—there was a big cavity where the door should have been—and the walls were thick with graffiti.

As I started to climb the stairs, the smell of urine was overpowering. On some floors the stairwells were dark; on others there was a muted glow. I walked up four flights, maybe five, trying to keep count, and then I came upon a landing where a group of young men, high-school age, were shooting dice for money.

"Nigger, what the fuck are you doing here?" one of them shouted. I tried to make out their faces, but in the fading light I could barely see a thing.

I tried to explain, again. "I'm a student at the university, doing a survey, and I'm looking for some families."

The young men rushed up to me, within inches of my face. Again someone asked what I was doing there. I told them the numbers of the apartments I was looking for. They told me that no one lived in the building.

Suddenly some more people showed up, a few of them older than the teenagers. One of them, a man about my age with an oversize baseball cap, grabbed my clipboard and asked what I was doing. I tried to explain, but he didn't seem interested. He kept adjusting his too-big hat as it fell over his face.

"Julio over here says he's a student," he told everyone. His tone

indicated he didn't believe me. Then he turned back to me. "Who do you represent?"

"Represent?" I asked.

"C'mon, nigger!" one of the younger men shouted. "We know you're with somebody, just tell us who."

Another one, laughing, pulled something out of his waistband. At first I couldn't tell what it was, but then it caught a glint of light and I could see that it was a gun. He moved it around, pointing it at my head once in a while, and muttered something over and over—"I'll take him," he seemed to be saying.

Then he smiled. "You do *not* want to be fucking with the Kings," he said. "I'd just tell us what you know."

"Hold on, nigger," another one said. He was holding a knife with a six-inch blade. He began twirling it around in his fingers, the handle spinning in his palm, and the strangest thought came over me: *That's the exact same knife my friend Brian used to dig a hole for our tent in the Sierra Nevadas.* "Let's have some fun with this boy," he said. "C'mon, Julio, where you live? On the East Side, right? You don't look like the West Side Mexicans. You flip right or left? Five or six? You run with the Kings, right? You know we're going to find out, so you might as well tell us."

Kings or Sharks, flip right or left, five or six. It appeared that I was Julio, the Mexican gang member from the East Side. It wasn't clear yet if this was a good or a bad thing.

Two of the other young men started to search my bag. They pulled out the questionnaire sheets, pen and paper, a few sociology books, my keys. Someone else patted me down. The guy with the too-big hat who had taken my clipboard looked over the papers and then handed everything back to me. He told me to go ahead and ask a question.

By now I was sweating despite the cold. I leaned backward to try to get some light to fall on the questionnaire. The first question was one I had adapted from several other similar surveys; it was one of a set of questions that targeted young people's self-perceptions.

"How does it feel to be black and poor?" I read. Then I gave the multiple-choice answers: "Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good."

The guy with the too-big hat began to laugh, which prompted the others to start giggling.

"Fuck you!" he told me. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

He turned away and muttered something that made everyone laugh uncontrollably. They went back to quarreling about who I was. They talked so fast that I couldn't easily follow. It seemed they were as confused as I was. I wasn't armed, I didn't have tattoos, I wasn't wearing anything that showed allegiance to another gang—I didn't wear a hat turned toward the left or right, for instance, I wasn't wearing blue or red, I didn't have a star insignia anywhere, either the five- or six-point variety.

Two of them started to debate my fate. "If he's here and he don't get back," said one, "you know they're going to come looking for him."

"Yeah, and I'm getting the first shot," said the other. "Last time I had to watch the crib. Fuck that. This time I'm getting in the car. I'm *shooting* some niggers."

"These Mexicans ain't afraid of shit. They kill each other in prison, over *nothing*. You better let me handle it, boy. You don't even *speak* Mexican."

"Man, I met a whole bunch of them in jail. I killed three just the other day."

As their claims escalated, so did their insults.

"Yeah, but your mama spoke Mexican when I was with her."

"Nigger, your *daddy* was a Mexican."

I sat down on a cold concrete step. I struggled to follow what they were talking about. A few of them seemed to think that I was an advance scout from a Mexican gang, conducting reconnaissance for a drive-by attack. From what I could glean, it seemed as if some black gangs were aligned with certain Mexican gangs but in other cases the black gangs and Mexican gangs were rivals.

They stopped talking when a small entourage entered the stairwell. At the front was a large man, powerfully built but with a boyish face. He also looked to be about my age, maybe a few years older, and he radiated calm. He had a toothpick or maybe a lollipop in his mouth, and it was obvious from his carriage that he was the boss. He checked out everyone who was on the scene, as if making a mental list of what each person was doing. His name was J.T., and while I couldn't have known it at this moment, he was about to become the most formidable person in my life, for a long time to come.

J.T. asked the crowd what was happening, but no one could give him a straight answer. Then he turned to me. "What are you doing here?"

He had a few glittery gold teeth, a sizable diamond earring, and deep, hollow eyes that fixed on mine without giving away anything. Once again, I started to go through my spiel: I was a student at the university, et cetera, et cetera.

"You speak Spanish?" he asked.

"No!" someone shouted out. "But he probably speaks Mexican!"

"Nigger, just shut the fuck up," J.T. said. Then someone mentioned my questionnaire, which seemed to catch his interest. He asked me to tell him about it.

I explained the project as best as I could. It was being overseen by a national poverty expert, I said, with the goal of understanding the lives of young black men in order to design better public policy.

My role, I said, was very basic: conducting surveys to generate data for the study. There was an eerie silence when I finished. Everyone stood waiting, watching J.T.

He took the questionnaire from my hand, barely glanced at it, then handed it back. Everything he did, every move he made, was deliberate and forceful.

I read him the same question that I had read the others. He didn't laugh, but he smiled. *How does it feel to be black and poor?*

"I'm not *black,*" he answered, looking around at the others knowingly.

"Well, then, how does it feel to be *African American* and poor?" I tried to sound apologetic, worried that I had offended him.

"I'm not African American either. I'm a nigger."

Now I didn't know what to say. I certainly didn't feel comfortable asking him how it felt to be a *nigger.* He took back my questionnaire and looked it over more carefully. He turned the pages, reading the questions to himself. He appeared disappointed, though I sensed that his disappointment wasn't aimed at me.

"*Niggers* are the ones who live in this building," he said at last. "*African Americans* live in the suburbs. African Americans wear ties to work. Niggers can't find no work."

He looked at a few more pages of the questionnaire. "You ain't going to learn shit with this thing." He kept shaking his head and then glanced toward some of the older men standing about, checking to see if they shared his disbelief. Then he leaned in toward me and spoke quietly. "How'd you get to do this if you don't even know who we are, what we're about?" His tone wasn't accusatory as much as disappointed, and perhaps a bit bewildered.

I didn't know what to do. *Perhaps I should get up and leave?* But then *he* turned quickly and left, telling the young men who stayed behind to "watch him." Meaning me.

They seemed excited by how things had turned out. They had mostly stood still while J.T. was there, but now they grew animated. "Man, you shouldn't mess with him like that," one of them told me. "See, you should've just told him who you were. You might have been gone by now. He might have let you go."

"Yeah, you fucked up, nigger," another one said. "You really fucked this one up."

I leaned back on the cold step and wondered exactly what I had done to "fuck up." For the first time that day, I had a moment to ponder what had been happening. Random thoughts entered my mind, but, oddly, none of them concerned my personal safety: *What the hell is Bill Wilson going to do if he finds out about this? How am I supposed to know whether to address an interview subject as black, African American, or Negro? Did every Ph.D. student have to go through this? Can I go to the bathroom?* The sun had set, and it was getting colder. I pulled my jacket tighter and bent over, trying to keep out of the wintry draft.

Yo! Freeze, you want one?"

An older man walked in with a grocery bag full of beers and offered a bottle to one of the young men guarding me. He passed out beers to everyone there. Pretty soon they were all in a better mood. They even gave me a bottle.

By now it was well into the evening. No one seemed to have anywhere to go. The young men just sat in the stairwell telling one another all kinds of stories: about sexual conquests, the best way to smoke a marijuana cigarette, schoolteachers they'd like to have sex with, the rising cost of clothing, cops they wanted to kill, and where they would go when their high-rise building was torn down. This last fact surprised me. Nothing in our records at the university suggested that these projects were closing.

"You have to leave?" I asked. "What kind of neighborhood will you be going to?"

"Nigger, did someone tell you to talk?" one of them said.

"Yeah, Julio," said another, moving in closer. "You ain't got no business here."

I shut my mouth for a while, but some other men stopped by, and they were more talkative. I learned that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was indeed tearing down the Lake Park projects in order to build condominiums and town houses. Some residents were staying on as squatters, and the gang was helping them by pirating electricity.

It was clear to me at this point that the young men I'd stumbled upon in this stairwell were junior members of a broad-based gang, the Black Kings, that sold crack cocaine. The older members explained that the gang was trying to forestall demolition but that it wasn't a pure act of charity: When this building was torn down, they would lose one of their best drug-selling locations.

Once in a while, I tried to interject a research question—What kinds of jobs did the people who lived here have? Why weren't the police in the building?—but they seemed less interested in answering me than in talking among themselves about sex, power, and money.

After a few hours, J.T. returned with a few other men, each of them carrying a grocery bag. More beer. It was late, and everyone seemed a little punchy. The air was stale, and some of the young men had been wondering when they might be able to leave. For the moment, however, the beer seemed to settle them down.

"Here," J.T. said, tossing me another bottle. Then he came closer. "You know you're not supposed to be here," he said quietly. He

seemed to feel sorry for me and, at the same time, curious about my presence. Then he, too, began talking about the scheduled demolition of the Lake Park projects. He explained that he and his men had holed up in this building partly out of protest, joining the residents to challenge the housing authority's decision to kick them out.

Then he asked me where I was from.

"California," I said, surprised at the change in topic. "Born in India."

"Hmm. So you don't speak Spanish."

"Actually, I do."

"See! I told you this nigger was a Mexican," said one young gangster, jumping up with a beer in his hand. "We should've beat his ass back then, man! Sent him back to his people. You know they're coming around tonight, you know they *will* be here. We need to get ready—"

J.T. shot the young man a look, then turned back to me. "You're not from Chicago," he said. "You should really not be walking through the projects. People can get hurt."

J.T. started tossing questions at me. What other black neighborhoods, he asked, was I going to with my questionnaire? Why do researchers use multiple-choice surveys like the one I was using? Why don't they just *talk* with people? How much money can you make as a professor?

Then he asked what I hoped to gain by studying young black people. I ticked off a few of the pressing questions that sociologists were asking about urban poverty.

"I had a few sociology classes," he said. "In college. Hated that shit."

The last word I expected to exit this man's mouth was "college." But there it was. I didn't want to push my luck, so I thought I'd just keep listening and hope for a chance to ask about his background.

By now everyone seemed fairly drunk and, more alarmingly, excited at the prospect of a gang war with the Mexicans. Some of the older men started talking logistics—where to station the gang members for the fighting, which vacant apartments could be used as lookout spots, and so on.

J.T. dismissed their belief that something was going to happen that night. Once again he ordered two of the younger men to stay with me. Then he left. I returned to my seat, sipping a beer now and then. It looked like I would be spending the night with them, so I tried to accept my fate. I was grateful when they said I could go to the bathroom—which, as it turned out, was another stairwell a few floors up. Considering that water, and probably urine, were constantly dripping onto our own landing, I wondered why they didn't use a lower floor instead.

The young men stayed up in the stairwell all night, drinking and smoking. Some of them strayed out to the balcony once in a while to see if any cars had pulled up to the building. One of them threw an empty beer bottle to the ground six stories down. The sound of broken glass echoing through the stairwell gave me a fright, but no one else even flinched.

Every so often a few new people came in, always with more beer. They talked vaguely about gang issues and the types of weapons that different gangs had. I listened as attentively as I could but stopped asking questions. Occasionally someone asked me again about my background. They all at last seemed convinced that I was not in fact a Mexican gang member, although some of them remained concerned that I "spoke Mexican." A few of them dozed off inadvertently, sitting on the concrete floor, their heads leaning against the wall.

I spent most of the night sitting on the cold steps, trying to avoid the protruding shards of metal. I would have liked to sleep also, but I was too nervous.

Finally J.T. came back. The early-morning sun was making its way into the stairwell. He looked tired and preoccupied.

"Go back to where you came from," he told me, "and be more careful when you walk around the city." Then, as I began gathering up my bag and clipboard, he talked to me about the proper way to study people. "You shouldn't go around asking them silly-ass questions," he said. "With people like us, you should hang out, get to know what they do, how they do it. No one is going to answer questions like that. You need to understand how young people live on the streets."

I was astounded at what a thoughtful person J.T. appeared to be. It seemed as if he were somehow invested in my succeeding, or at least considered himself responsible for my safety. I got up and headed for the stairs. One of the older men reached out and offered me his hand. I was surprised. As I shook his hand, he nodded at me. I glanced back and noticed that everyone, including J.T., was watching.

What are you supposed to say after a night like this? I couldn't think of anything worthwhile, so I just turned and left.

As I walked back to my apartment in Hyde Park, everything seemed fundamentally different. Crossing from one neighborhood to the next, I speculated about gang boundaries. When I saw a group of people huddled on a corner, I wondered if they were protecting their turf. I had a lot of questions: Why would anyone join a gang? What were the benefits? Didn't they get bored hanging out in stairwells—and how could anyone possibly stand the smell of

urine for that long? The surveys in my bag felt heavy and useless. I began to worry about my relationship with Professor Wilson. He certainly wouldn't approve of my experimental journey, done without his approval, and I wondered whether he would pull me off the project if he found out what I'd done. The voice of my father—a professor himself—entered my head. He had always given me advice about education. Throughout my college years, he stressed the need to listen to my teachers, and when I shipped off to Chicago, he told me that the key to success in graduate school would be to develop a good relationship with my advisers.

I took a shower and thought about the rest of my day. I had books to read, papers to write, some laundry to do. But none of that seemed very significant. I tried to sleep, but the rest was fitful. I couldn't get the previous night out of my head. I thought of calling someone, but whom? I wasn't close with any other members of Wilson's research team—and they, too, would probably be upset to find out what I'd done. I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the complicated lives of black youth in inner-city Chicago, I had only one good option: to accept J.T.'s counsel and hang out with people. So I headed back to the Lake Park projects to see if I could once again find J.T. and his gang.

I wasn't really scared as I walked north along Cottage Grove Avenue. A little nervous, certainly, but I was pretty sure that J.T. didn't see me as any kind of a threat. Worst-case scenario? Embarrassment. He and his gang would ask me to leave or they'd laugh at my desire to get to know them better.

It was maybe two o'clock in the afternoon when I arrived. This time I came bearing a six-pack of beer. There were about a dozen young men out front of Number 4040, standing around their cars.

Some of them began to point at me. A few others were playing handball by throwing a tennis ball against the building. As I drew close, all of them turned to watch me.

"You got to be kidding me," I heard someone say. Then I saw J.T., leaning back against a car, smiling and shaking his head.

"Beer?" I said, tossing him a bottle. "You said I should hang out with folks if I want to know what their life was like."

J.T. didn't answer. A few of the guys burst out laughing in disbelief. "He's crazy, I told you!" said one.

"Nigger thinks he's going to hang out with us!"

"I still think he's a Latin King."

Finally J.T. spoke up. "All right, the brother wants to hang out," he said, unfazed. "Let him hang out!"

J.T. grinned and opened up his bottle. Others came around and quickly grabbed the rest of the beers. Then, surprisingly, they all went back to their business. They didn't seem to be discussing anything very pressing, nor were they talking about any criminal activities. They mainly talked about what kind of rims to put on their cars. A few of them took care of the drug customers, handing vials of crack to the people who walked over from nearby buildings or drove up in run-down cars. In the distance I could see a few churchgoers on a Sunday stroll. A handful of gang members stood guard in front of Number 4040, and after a time some of the guys hanging out near the cars relieved them.

J.T. had a lot of questions for me: *You always use those surveys? Can you get a good job after you finish with this research? Why don't you study your own people?*

This last one would become one of his favorites. I felt a strange kind of intimacy with J.T., unlike the bond I'd felt even with good friends. It would have been hard to explain then and is just as hard now, but we had somehow connected in an instant, and deeply.

I tried to act nonchalant when J.T. asked me these questions, but inside I was overjoyed that he was curious about my work. I had a feeling that I was talking to someone about whom most people probably knew little. I didn't know exactly where our conversations might lead, but I sensed I was getting a unique perspective on life in a poor neighborhood. There were plenty of sociological studies on economically disenfranchised youth, but most relied on dry statistics of unemployment, crime, and family hardship. I had joined Bill Wilson's team in hopes of getting closer to the ground. My opportunity to do just that was standing right in front of me.

Every now and then, J.T. went inside the building to meet in private with someone who had driven up in a car.

I played a little handball and, showing off my hard-won suburban soccer skills, bounced the tennis ball off my head a few dozen times. Some of the older gang members were curious about my identity, my role at the university, and of course the reason I had returned. They all looked as tired as I was, and it felt as if we were all taking some welcome comic relief in one another's presence.

In general, I said very little. I asked no "meaningful" questions—mostly about their cars, why they were jacked up so high and whether they changed their own oil—and quickly saw that this strategy might actually work. I had learned the night before that they weren't very receptive to interview questions; they probably had plenty of that from cops, social workers, and the occasional journalist. So I just made small talk, trying to pass the time and act as if I'd been there before.

When J.T. returned from a trip into the building, everyone straightened up a bit.

"Okay!" he shouted. "They're ready, let's go over there." He ordered a few younger members into the building's lobby and motioned the others to get into their cars. He looked at me in a funny

way. He smiled. I could tell that he was wondering what to say to me. I hoped he was going to invite me along to wherever they were going.

"You got balls," he said. "I'll give you that. We have to run. Why don't you meet me here next week. Early morning, all right?"

This offer took me by surprise. But I certainly wasn't going to turn him down. J.T. put out his hand, and I shook it. I tried again to think of something witty to say. "Yeah, sure," I said, "but you're buying next time."

He turned and hustled toward his car, a shiny purple Malibu Classic with gold rims. All of a sudden, there was no one left standing around but me.

TWO

First Days on Federal Street

I began spending time with J.T. We'd usually hang out for a little while with some of the more senior members of his gang, and then we'd go for a ride around the South Side.

Although it would take me a few years to learn about J.T.'s life in detail, he did tell me a good bit during our first few weeks together: He had grown up in this neighborhood, then gone to college on an athletic scholarship and found that he loved reading about history and politics. After college he took a job selling office supplies and industrial textiles at a midsize corporation in downtown Chicago. But he felt that his chances of success were limited because he was black; he got angry when he saw white people with lesser skills get promoted ahead of him. Within two years he left the mainstream to return to the projects and the gang life.

J.T. loved to talk about black Chicago as we drove around—the history of the neighborhood, the gangs, the underground economy. Like Old Time and the others who frequented Washington Park, J.T.

had his own personal version of history, replete with stories about great gang leaders and dramatic gang wars. He took me to his favorite restaurants, most of which had their own lively histories. One of them, Gladys's, was a soul-food restaurant where elected community and political leaders used to meet in private. Another marked the spot where two gangs once signed a legendary truce. J.T. always offered to pay for our meals and I, out of appreciation and a student's budget, always accepted.

J.T. once asked me what sociologists had to say about gangs and inner-city poverty. I told him that some sociologists believed in a "culture of poverty"—that is, poor blacks didn't work because they didn't value employment as highly as other ethnic groups did, and they transmitted this attitude across generations.

"So you want me to take pride in the job, and you're only paying me minimum wage?" J.T. countered. "It don't sound like you think much about the job yourself." His tone was more realistic than defensive. In fact, his rejoinder echoed the very criticisms that some sociologists applied to the "culture of poverty" view.

J.T. and I often passed time together at a diner. He might sit quietly, working through the details of his gang's operations, while I read for my sociology classes. Since he didn't want to generate tangible evidence of his enterprise, J.T. didn't write down very much, but he could keep innumerable details straight in his mind: the wages of each one of his two hundred members, the shifts each of them worked, recent spikes in supply or demand, and so on. Occasionally he drifted off, muttering calculations to himself. He didn't share many details with me, but he did sometimes give me a sort of quiz.

"Okay, I got something for you," he said one day over breakfast. "Let's say two guys are offering me a great deal on raw product." I knew enough to know that "raw product" meant powdered cocaine,

which J.T.'s gang cooked up into crack. "One of them says if I pay twenty percent higher than the usual rate, he'll give me a ten percent discount a year from now, meaning that if the supply goes down, he'll sell to me before the other niggers he deals with. The other guy says he'll give me a ten percent discount now if I agree to buy from him at the regular price a year from now. What would you do?"

"This all depends on whether you think the supply will be affected a year from now, right?" I said.

"Right, so . . . ?"

"Well, I don't have any idea how this market works, so I'm not sure what to do."

"No, that's not how you need to think. You always take the sure bet in this game. *Nothing* can be predicted—not supply, not anything. The nigger who tells you he's going to have product a year from now is lying. He could be in jail or dead. So take your discount now."

As fascinating as I found such conversations, I rarely took notes in front of J.T., because I didn't want to make him cautious about what he said. Instead I waited until I got back to my apartment to write down as much as I could recall.

We often met a few times a week, but only when he wanted. He would phone me to arrange our meetings, sometimes just a few minutes in advance. J.T. didn't like to talk on the phone. In his soft voice, he'd tell me where and when to meet, and then he'd hang up. Once in a while, I didn't even have time to answer that I couldn't meet because I had a class—and then I'd cut class and meet him anyway. It was pretty thrilling to have a gang boss calling me up to go hang out with him. There were times I wanted to tell my professors the real reason I missed class now and then, but I never did.

Occasionally I hinted to J.T. that I would really, really like to learn more about gang life. But I was too meek to ask for any kind of for-

malized arrangement. Nor did he offer. Every time he dropped me off in front of my apartment building, he'd just stare out the window. I didn't know whether to say "Good-bye," "Hope to see you again," or "Call me sometime."

One morning, after I'd been hanging out with him for perhaps eight months, J.T. said we'd be visiting a different housing development, the Robert Taylor Homes. I had heard of Robert Taylor; *everybody* had heard of Robert Taylor. It was the largest public housing project in the United States, about ten times bigger than the Lake Park projects, with twenty-eight drab high-rise buildings stretched along a two-mile corridor. It lay a few miles away from the U of C, but since it ran alongside the Dan Ryan Expressway, one of Chicago's main arteries, pretty much everyone in the city drove past Robert Taylor at one time or another.

"I'm going to take you to meet somebody," J.T. said, "but I don't want you to open your mouth. Do you think you can do that?"

"Do I ever open my mouth?" I asked.

"No, but every so often you get a little excited, especially after you drink all that coffee. You open your mouth today, and that's it—we're through. Okay?"

Only once before had I heard such insistence in J.T.'s voice, and that was the night we first met in the stairwell of Building Number 4040 in the Lake Park projects. I finished my breakfast quickly, and then we jumped into his Malibu. The late-morning sky was overcast. J.T. was quiet except for asking me once in a while to see if any cops were following him. He had never asked this before. For the first time, I became fully conscious of just what I was doing: tagging along with the leader of a major crack-selling gang.

But I still hadn't admitted to myself that the man I sat next to

was, at bottom, a criminal. I was too caught up in the thrill of observing the thug life firsthand. In the halcyon suburb where I grew up, people didn't even wash their cars on the street. In front of me here was a movie come to life.

There was something else, too, that helped me ignore the questionable morality of the situation. The University of Chicago scholars who helped invent the field of sociology, back when it first became a legitimate academic discipline, did so by venturing into the murkier corners of the city. They became famous through their up-close study of the hobo, the hustler, the socialite; they gained access to brothels and speakeasies and the smoky back rooms where politicians plied their art. Lately I'd been reading the works of these scholars. So even though I was hanging out with drug traffickers and thieves, at heart I felt like I was just being a good sociologist.

The street leading into the Robert Taylor Homes was lined with old, beat-up cars. A school crossing guard leaned on the hood of a car, her morning duty done, looking as if she'd been through a war. She waved knowingly at J.T. as we drove past. We pulled up in front of a high-rise, the lobby populated by a bunch of young men who seemed to stand at attention when they saw J.T.'s car. Unlike the Lake Park projects, which were nearly abandoned, Robert Taylor was thrumming with life. I could hear rap music blasting from a stereo. People stood around smoking cigarettes and, from the smell of it, marijuana. Every so often a parent and child passed through the loose crowd.

J.T. parked his Malibu and strode toward the building like a badass cowboy swaggering into a bar. He stopped just short of the entrance, surveying the area and waiting as people came to greet him. As each young man made his way over, J.T. extended his hand gra-

ciously. Few words were spoken; most of the communication was in the form of subtle nods, signals familiar to everyone but me.

"When you gonna come and see me, baby?" one woman called out, and then another: "You gonna take me for a ride, sweetheart?" J.T. smiled and waved them off, playfully tapping their young children on the head as he passed. Two older women in bright blue jackets that read TENANT PATROL came up and hugged J.T., asked him why he didn't come around more often. J.T. was obviously well known in these parts, although I had no idea why.

Just then someone emerged from the lobby. He was obese, roughly J.T.'s age, and he was breathing heavily. His name was Curly, and—as if in mockery of my stereotypical preconceptions—he was a ringer for Rerun from *What's Happening!!* He and J.T. clasped hands, and then J.T. motioned for me to follow them.

"Your mama's house or mine?" Curly asked.

"Mama's pissed at me," J.T. said. "Let's go to your place."

I followed them up a few flights of stairs. We stepped inside an apartment furnished with couches and a few reclining chairs that faced a big TV. There was a Christian show playing. The walls were hung with family photos and a painting of Jesus Christ. Toys were strewn about the floor, and the kitchen counter was crowded with boxes of cereal and cookies. I could smell chicken and rice on the stove. Balls of yarn and knitting needles sat atop a drab glass table. The domestic scene surprised me a bit, for I had read so much about the poverty and danger in Robert Taylor, how children ran around without parents and how drugs had overtaken the community.

J.T. gestured for me to sit on the sofa, and then he and Curly sat down to talk. J.T. didn't introduce me, and before long I was forgotten entirely. Between their fast talk and the gangster vocabulary, I couldn't understand much of what they were saying, but I did manage to pick out some key words: "tax," "product," "monthly dues,"

"Cobras," "Kings," "police," "CHA security." They talked quickly and earnestly. After a while they began throwing numbers at each other in some kind of negotiation. A few times a young man arrived at the screen door and interrupted them, shouting "Five-Oh on Federal" or "Five-Oh in 26." Later J.T. would explain that that's how they communicated the whereabouts of the police: "Five-Oh" meant police, "26" was a building number in Robert Taylor, and "Federal" was a busy street flanking the projects. Cell phones hadn't yet arrived—the year was 1989—so gang members had to pass along such information manually.

I felt a sudden urge to go to the bathroom, but I didn't feel comfortable asking to use the one in the apartment. After some squirming I decided to stand up and walk around. As I made a move to get up, J.T. and Curly looked at me disapprovingly. I sat back down.

Their meeting had lasted at least two hours. "That's it," J.T. finally said. "I'm hungry. Let's pick it up tomorrow."

Curly smiled. "It'll be good to have you back," he said. "Ain't the same since you left."

Then J.T. glanced at me. "Oh, shit," he said to Curly. "I forgot about him. This is Sudhir. He's a cop."

The two of them began laughing. "You can go ahead and take a piss now," J.T. said, and they both laughed even harder. I began to sense that in exchange for access I was meant to serve as a source of entertainment for J.T.

On the car ride back to Hyde Park, J.T. told me what had just happened. He explained that he had grown up in the very Robert Taylor building we'd just visited. For the past couple of years, he'd been working out of the Lake Park projects because the Black Kings' citywide leaders had wanted to increase productivity there. But since the Lake Park projects were now slated for demolition, J.T. was returning to Robert Taylor, where he would be merging his own

Black Kings gang with the local BK faction, which was run by Curly. This merger was being executed at the behest of the gang's higher-ups. Curly had been installed as a temporary leader when J.T. was sent to turn around the Lake Park operation. Curly apparently wasn't a very good manager, which made the gang bosses' decision to bring J.T. back a simple one.

Robert Taylor and the other projects on State Street, J.T. told me, were "easy money," partly since thousands of customers lived nearby but also because of "the white folks who drive over to buy our shit." They came from Bridgeport, Armour Square, and other predominantly white ethnic neighborhoods on the far side of the Dan Ryan Expressway, buying mostly crack cocaine but also some heroin and marijuana. In his new assignment, J.T. told me, he hoped to earn "a hundred times" what he currently earned and buy a house for his mother, who still lived in Robert Taylor. He also said he hoped to buy an apartment for his girlfriend and their children. (In fact, he mentioned several such girlfriends, each of whom apparently needed an apartment.)

At the Lake Park projects, J.T.'s income had been dropping from a peak of about thirty thousand dollars a year. But he told me that now, in Robert Taylor, he stood to make as much as seventy-five thousand dollars or a hundred thousand if business was steady, which would put him nearly in the same league as some of the gang's higher-ups.

He made a few references to the gang's hierarchy and his effort to rise within it. There were a few dozen Black Kings officers above him, spread throughout Chicago, who earned their money by managing several gang factions like J.T.'s. These men were known as "lieutenants" and "captains." Above *them* was another level of gangsters who were known as the "board of directors." I had had no idea

how much a street gang's structure mirrored the structure of just about any other business in America.

J.T. made it clear that if you rose high enough in the Black Kings dynasty, and lived long enough, you could make an awful lot of money. As he discussed his move up the ladder, I felt a knot in my stomach. Since meeting him I had entertained the notion that my dissertation research might revolve around his gang and its drug trafficking. I had spoken with him not only about his own gang "set" but about all the Black Kings sets in the city—how they collaborated or fought with one another over turf, how the crack-cocaine economy was fundamentally altering the nature of the urban street gang. Although there was a great deal of social-science literature on gangs, very few researchers had written about the actual business dealings of a gang, and even fewer had firsthand access to a gang's leadership. As we pulled up to my apartment, I realized that I had never formally asked J.T. about gaining access to his life and work. Now it seemed I might be getting shut out just as things were heating up.

"So when you do you think you'll be moving over to Robert Taylor?" I asked.

"Not sure," he said absentmindedly, staring out at the panhandlers who worked the gas station near my apartment.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be busy now—I mean, even busier than you've been. So listen, I just wanted to thank you—"

"Nigger, are we breaking up?" J.T. started laughing.

"No! I'm just trying to—"

"Listen, my man, I know you have to write a term paper—and what are you going to write it on? On me, right?" He giggled and stuck a cigar in his mouth.

It seemed that J.T. craved the attention. It seemed that I was more than just entertainment for him: I was someone who might

take him seriously. I hadn't thought about the drawbacks of having my research dependent on the whims of one person. But now I turned giddy at the prospect of continuing our conversations. "That's right," I said. " 'The Life and Times of John Henry Torrance.' What do you think?"

"I like it, I like it." He paused. "Okay, get the fuck out, gotta run."

He offered his hand as I opened the car door. I shook it and nodded at him.

My short walk north to the Lake Park projects would now be replaced by a longer commute, usually by bus, to the Robert Taylor Homes. But as a result of his relocation, J.T. reported that he'd be out of touch for a few weeks. I decided to use that time to do some research on housing projects in general and the Robert Taylor Homes in particular.

I learned that the Chicago Housing Authority had built the project between 1958 and 1962, naming it after the agency's first African-American chairman. It was the size of a small city, with forty-four hundred apartments housing about thirty thousand people. Poor blacks had arrived in Chicago en masse from the South during the great migrations of the 1930s and 1940s, which left a pressing need for the city to accommodate them.

In the beginning, the project was greeted with considerable optimism, but it soon soured. Black activists were angry that Chicago politicians put the project squarely in the middle of an already crowded black ghetto, thereby sparing the city's white ethnic neighborhoods. Urban planners complained that the twenty-eight buildings occupied only 7 percent of the ninety-six-acre plot, leaving huge swaths of vacant land that isolated the project from the wider community. Architects declared the buildings unwelcoming and

practically uninhabitable from the outset, even though the design was based upon celebrated French urban-planning principles.

And, most remarkably, law-enforcement officials deemed Robert Taylor too dangerous to patrol. The police were unwilling to provide protection until tenants curbed their criminality—and stopped hurling bottles or shooting guns out the windows whenever the police showed up.

In newspaper headlines, Robert Taylor was variously called "Congo Hilton," "Hellhole," and "Fatherless World"—and this was when it was still relatively new. By the end of the 1970s, it had gotten worse. As the more stable working families took advantage of civil-rights victories by moving into previously segregated areas of Chicago, the people left behind lived almost uniformly below the poverty line. A staggering 90 percent of the adults in Robert Taylor reported welfare—cash disbursements, food stamps, and Medicaid—as their sole form of support, and even into the 1990s that percentage would never get lower. There were just two social-service centers for nearly twenty thousand children. The buildings themselves began to fall apart, with at least a half dozen deaths caused by plunging elevators.

By the time I got to Chicago, at the tail end of the 1980s, Robert Taylor was habitually referred to as the hub of Chicago's "gang and drug problem." That was the phrase always invoked by the city's media, police, and academic researchers. They weren't wrong. The poorest parts of the city were controlled largely by street gangs like the Black Kings, which made their money not only dealing drugs but also by extortion, gambling, prostitution, selling stolen property, and countless other schemes. It was outlaw capitalism, and it ran hot, netting small fortunes for the bosses of the various gangs. In the newspapers, gang leaders were commonly reported as having multimillion-dollar fortunes. This may have been an exaggeration,

but it was true that some police busts of the leaders' homes netted hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash.

For the rest of the community, the payout of this outlaw economy—drug addiction and public violence—was considerably less appealing. Combine this menace with decades of government neglect, and what you found in the Robert Taylor Homes were thousands of families struggling to survive. It was the epitome of an "underclass" urban neighborhood, with the poor living hard and virtually separate lives from the mainstream.

But there was surprisingly little reportage on the American inner city—and even less on how the gangs managed to control such a sprawling enterprise, or how a neighborhood like Robert Taylor managed to cope with these outlaw capitalists. Thanks to my chance meeting with J.T. and his willingness to let me tag along with him, I felt as if I stood on the threshold of this world in a way that might really change the public's—if not the academy's—understanding.

I wanted to bring J.T. to Bill Wilson's attention, but I didn't know how. I was already working on some of Wilson's projects, but these were large, survey-based studies that queried several thousand people at a time. Wilson's research team included sociologists, economists, psychologists, and a dozen graduate students glued to their computers, trying to find hidden patterns in the survey data that might reveal the causes of poverty. I didn't know anyone who was walking around talking to people, let alone gang members, in the ghetto. Even though I knew that my entrée into J.T.'s life was the stuff of sociology, as old as the field itself, it still felt like I was doing something unconventional, bordering on rogue behavior.

So while I devoted time to hanging out with J.T., I told Wilson and others only the barest details of my fieldwork. I figured that I'd

eventually come up with a concrete research topic that involved J.T., at which point I could share with Wilson a well-worked-out set of ideas.

In late spring, several weeks after his meeting with Curly, J.T. finally summoned me to Robert Taylor. He had moved in with his mother in her apartment, a four-bedroom unit in the northern end of the complex. J.T. usually stayed in a different neighborhood, in one of the apartments he rented for various girlfriends. But now, he said, he needed to be in Robert Taylor full-time to get his gang firmly transplanted into its new territory. He told me to take the bus from Hyde Park down Fifty-fifth Street to State Street, where he'd have a few gang members meet me at the bus stop. It wasn't safe to walk around by myself.

Three of J.T.'s foot soldiers picked me up in a rusty Caprice. They were young and affectless and didn't have anything to say to me. As low-ranking members of the gang, they spent a lot of their time running errands for J.T. Once, when J.T. was a little drunk and getting excited about my writing his biography, he offered to assign me one of his gang members as a personal driver. I declined.

We drove up State Street, past a long stretch of Robert Taylor high-rises, and stopped at a small park in the middle of the complex. It was the sort of beautiful spring day, sunny, with a fresh lake breeze, that Chicagoans know will disappear once the brutal summer settles in. About fifty people of all ages were having a barbecue. There were colorful balloons printed with HAPPY BIRTHDAY CARLA tied to picnic tables. J.T. sat at one table, surrounded by families with lots of young children, playing and eating and making happy noise.

"Look who's here!" J.T. shouted. "The Professor. Welcome back."

His hands were sticky with barbecue sauce, so he just nodded, then introduced me to everyone at the table. I said hi to his girlfriend, whom I knew as Missie, and the young son they had together, Jamel.

"Is this the young man you've been telling me about?" said an older woman, putting her arm on my shoulder.

"Yes, Mama," J.T. said between bites, his voice as obedient as a young boy's.

"Well, Mr. Professor, I'm J.T.'s mother."

"They call her Ms. Mae," J.T. said.

"That's right," she said. "And you can call me that, too." She led me to another table and prepared a large plate of food for me. I told her I didn't eat meat, so she loaded me up with spaghetti, mac and cheese, greens, and cornbread.

We sat around for a few hours while the kids played. I spoke mostly to J.T.'s mother, and we forged a bond immediately. Sensing my interests, she began talking about the challenges of raising a family in public housing. She pointed to different people at the barbecue and filled in their stories. Carla, the birthday girl, was a one-year-old whose father and mother were both in jail for selling drugs. The adults in her building had decided to raise the child. This meant hiding her from the Department of Child and Family Services, which would have sent Carla into foster care. Different families took turns keeping Carla, shifting her to a new apartment whenever they caught wind that the social workers were snooping around. Ms. Mae talked about how teenage girls shouldn't have children so early, about the tragedy of kids getting caught up in violence, the value of an education, and her insistence that J.T. attend college.

J.T. came over to tell me about a big party the Black Kings were hosting later that afternoon. His gang had won a South Side basketball tournament, and everyone would be celebrating. He and I took a walk toward his building. Again I had so many questions: What did

his mother think of the life he had chosen? How much did she even know? What did the typical Robert Taylor resident think about his organization?

Instead I asked a pretty tame one: "Why is everyone partying with you tonight? I thought you said it was a *gang* tournament."

"See, around here each building has an organization," he said.

"Organization," I knew, was one of the words that gang members sometimes used to refer to the gang; other words were "set" and "folks."

"And we don't just fight each other. We have basketball tournaments, softball tournaments, card games. Sometimes it's just people in the organization who play, but sometimes we find the best people in the building—like, we sometimes call Darryl, who used to play ball for Wisconsin, but he's not in the organization. So it's a building thing."

"So people in your building actually root for you?" I was puzzled as to how non–gang members viewed the Black Kings.

"Yeah! I know you think this sounds funny, but it's not like everyone hates us. You just have to see, it's a community thing."

He wasn't kidding. The party was held in a courtyard surrounded by three buildings, and several hundred people showed up to eat, drink beer, and party to the music of a DJ. All expenses were paid by the Black Kings.

I stayed close to J.T., sitting on the hood of his car, taking in all the activity. I watched young black men drive up in expensive sports cars, trailed by posses and girlfriends. They all greeted J.T. and congratulated him on winning the tournament.

J.T. explained that it was courtesy for leaders of some of the losing gangs to drop by. "The ones that are shooting at us won't come anywhere near us," he said, "but sometimes you got other organizations that you don't fight, that you just have a rivalry with." He told

me that the various gangs' higher-ranking leaders tended to interact peacefully, since they often did business together—unlike the teenagers, or "shorties," he said. "They mostly just beat the shit out of each other in high school or at parties."

J.T. didn't introduce me to many people who stopped by, and I didn't feel comfortable leaving my spot. So I just sat and watched until the beers began making me drowsy. By dusk the party was dying down. That's when J.T. had one of his "shorties" drive me back to my apartment.

After about a month of commuting to his building, I managed to convince J.T. that I didn't need an escort to meet me at the bus stop. If the weather was okay, I'd even walk, which gave me a chance to see some of the neighborhoods that surrounded Robert Taylor. They were all poor, but even with their mixture of dilapidated homes and abandoned lots, not nearly as intimidating.

I always got nervous as I approached Robert Taylor, especially if J.T. wasn't there to meet me. But by now I was known to the gang members stationed out front. So instead of searching me—which they often did to strangers, even if it was an ambulance driver or a utility worker—they let me go up to Ms. Mae's apartment on the tenth floor. She'd fix me a plate of food, and then we would sit and talk.

I felt self-conscious that Ms. Mae had to entertain me while I waited for J.T. I also figured she couldn't really afford to feed another mouth. I once tried to give her a few dollars for my meal. "Young man, don't ever do that again," she scolded, pushing the bills back at me. "Let me tell you something about us. We may be poor, but when you come over here, don't pity us, don't pardon us, and don't hold us to a lower standard than you hold yourself up to."

Ms. Mae was a heavyset woman in her late fifties who, unless she was off to church, always wore an apron. She always seemed to be in the middle of housework. Today's apron was flowery, yellow and pink, with MS. MAE and GOD BLESS printed on it. She wore thick glasses and a warm, inviting look on her face. "You know, I came here with the clothes on my back," she said. "Arkansas. Mother said there was no life for me down there no more. She said, 'Go see your auntie in Chicago, get yourself a man and a job, and don't turn around.' And I didn't. I raised six children in Chicago. Never looked back."

I sat and ate as she spoke, trying to keep up with the stories she was telling as well as the food she kept heaping on my plate.

"We live in a *community,* understand? Not the *projects*—I hate that word. We live in a *community.* We need a helping hand now and then, but who doesn't? Everyone in this building helps as much as they can. We share our food, just like I'm doing with you. My son says you're writing about his life—well, you may want to write about this community, and how we help each other. And when I come over to *your* house, you'll share with me. You'll cook for me if I'm hungry. But when you're here, you're in my home and my community. And we'll take care of you."

I felt nervous as she spoke. Her warmth and her notion of community certainly challenged what I had read about Robert Taylor. Ms. Mae spoke to me as though she were teaching a child about life, not giving an academic researcher answers to scientific questions. Indeed, the time I was spending with families felt less and less like research. People who knew nothing about me nevertheless took me inside their world, talked to me with such openness, and offered me the food that they had probably budgeted for their own children.

No one back at the U of C had prepared me to feel such strong emotional connections to the people I studied. None of the ethno-

graphic studies I'd read offered much guidance about the relationships a researcher formed during fieldwork and how to manage them. The books talked about the right way to ask a question or address a respondent during an interview, but little about managing relationships with the people you hung out with. In time I would meet the anthropologist Jean Comaroff, who taught me about the benefits and dangers of getting personally attached to sources, but that was still a few years away.

Nor was Ms. Mae's description of "community" something I was accustomed to from my own background. I don't think I could name more than a few people who lived on the nearby streets in the suburb where I grew up, and we certainly never borrowed from one another or planned activities together. Suddenly I envisioned Ms. Mae coming to my apartment someday for a visit and eating bland pasta and steamed vegetables, the only meal I could conceivably cook for her.

She and I kept speaking. I learned that Ms. Mae was the daughter of sharecroppers, had spent two decades as a nanny and a domestic worker, and was forced to move into public housing when her husband, J.T.'s father, died of heart disease. He had been a quiet, easygoing man who worked for the city's transportation department. Moving into Robert Taylor, she said, was her last-ditch effort to keep the family intact.

Finally J.T. walked into the apartment. He took one look at me and laughed. "Is that *all* you do around here?" he said. "I'm beginning to think the only reason you come over here is to eat!"

His mother told him to hush and brought over some more sweet potato pie for me.

"C'mon, Mr. Professor, finish your food," J.T. said. "I need to survey the building."

J.T. had by now firmly established his reign over a group of three buildings, one on State Street and two on Federal, each of which he liked to walk through at least once a week. "You have the CHA, the landlord, but then we also try to make sure that people are doing what they're told," he explained as we walked. "We can't have this place go crazy with niggers misbehaving. Because that's when police come around, and then customers stop coming around, and then we don't make our money. Simple as that."

As we entered the lobby of one of his buildings, 2315 Federal Street, he grabbed a few of his foot soldiers and told them to follow us. The August heat made the lobby's concrete walls sweat; they were cool to the touch but damp with humidity, just like all the people hanging around.

"I always start with the stairwells," J.T. said. There were three stairwells per building, two on the sides and one running up the middle, next to the elevator. "And I usually have my guys with me, just in case." He winked, as if I should know what "just in case" meant. I didn't, but I kept quiet. The foot soldiers, high-school kids with glittery, cheap necklaces and baggy tracksuits, walked quietly about five feet behind us.

We began climbing. It was only eleven on a weekday morning, but already the stairwells and landings were crowded with people drinking, smoking, hanging out. The stairwells were poorly lit and unventilated, and they smelled vile; there were puddles whose provenance I was happy to not know. The steps themselves were dangerous, many of the metal treads loose or missing. Who were all these people? Everybody we passed seemed to know J.T., and he had a word or a nod for each of them.

On the fifth floor, we came upon three older men, talking and laughing.

J.T. looked them over. "You all staying on the eleventh floor, right?" he asked.

"No," said one of them without looking up. "We moved to 1206."

"To 1206, huh? And who said you could do *that*?" None of them answered. "You need to settle up if you're in 1206, because you're *supposed* to stay in 1102, right?"

The men just cradled their beer cans, heads down, stung by the scolding.

J.T. called out to one of his foot soldiers, "Creepy, get these niggers over to T-Bone." T-Bone, I knew, was one of J.T.'s close friends and senior officers.

As we resumed our climbing, I asked J.T. what had just happened.

"Squatters," he said. "See, a lot of people who live around here don't have a lease. They just hang out in the stairs 'cause it's too cold outside, or they just need a safe place—maybe they're running from the police, or maybe they owe somebody money. We provide them protection. Sometimes they get out of hand, but most of them are pretty quiet. Anyway, they're here to stay."

"The gang protects the squatters?"

"Yeah, no one fucks with them if they're in here. I make sure of that. But we can't have two million of these niggers, so we have to keep track. They pay us."

As we continued our climb, we occasionally passed an older woman wearing a blue Tenant Patrol jacket. There were about a dozen of these women in each building, J.T. said. "They make sure that old folks are doing okay, and sometimes we help them." Somewhere around the thirteenth floor, J.T. stopped when he saw

a Tenant Patrol woman bent over a man who was squirming on the floor.

"Morning, Ms. Easley," J.T. said. The man looked like he was just waking up, but I could also smell vomit, and he seemed to be in pain. He lay right outside the incinerator room, and the garbage smelled terrible.

"He's coming down," Ms. Easley told J.T. "He said someone sold him some bad stuff."

"Hmm-hmm," J.T. said disapprovingly. "They all say that when something goes bad. Always blaming it on us."

"Can one of your boys take him to the clinic?"

"Shit, he'll probably just be back tonight," J.T. said, "doing the same thing."

"Yeah, baby, but we can't have him sitting here."

J.T. waved over the remaining foot soldier, Barry, who was trailing us. "Get a few niggers to take this man down to Fiftieth." Barry started in on his task; "Fiftieth" referred to the Robert Taylor medical clinic, on Fiftieth Street.

"All right, Ms. Easley," J.T. said, "but if I see this nigger here tomorrow and he's saying the same shit, Creepy is going to beat his ass." J.T. laughed.

"Yes, yes, I know," she said. "And let me talk to you for a second." She and J.T. took a short walk, and I saw him pull out a few bills and hand them over. Ms. Easley walked back toward me, smiling, and set off down the stairwell. "Thank you for this, sweetheart," she called to J.T. "The kids are going to be very happy!"

I followed J.T. out to the "gallery," the corridor that ran along the exterior of the project buildings. Although you entered the apartments from the gallery, it was really an outdoor hallway, exposed to the elements, with chain-link fencing from floor to ceiling. It got its

name, I had heard, because of its resemblance to a prison gallery, a metal enclosure meant to keep inmates in check. J.T. and I leaned up against the rail, looking out over the entire South Side and, beyond it, Lake Michigan.

Without my prodding, J.T. talked about what we had just seen. "Crackheads. Sometimes they mix shit—crack, heroin, alcohol, medicine—and they just can't see straight in the morning. Someone on the Tenant Patrol finds them and helps."

"Why don't you just call an ambulance?" I asked.

J.T. looked at me skeptically. "You kidding? Those folks almost never come out here when we call, or it takes them an hour."

"So you guys bring them to the hospital?"

"Well, I don't like my guys doing shit for them, but once in a while I guess I feel sorry for them. That's Creepy's decision, though. He's the one who runs the stairwell. It's up to him—usually. But this time I'm doing Ms. Easley a favor."

The stairwells, J.T. explained, were the one public area in the building where the gang allowed squatters to congregate. These areas inevitably became hangout zones for drug addicts and the homeless. J.T.'s foot soldiers, working in shifts, were responsible for making sure that no fights broke out there. "It ain't a pretty job," J.T. told me, laughing, "but that's how they learn to deal with niggers, learn to be tough on them."

The gang didn't charge the squatters much for staying in the building, and J.T. let the foot soldiers keep most of this squatter tax. That was one of the few ways foot soldiers could earn any money, since they held the lowest rank in the gang's hierarchy and weren't even eligible yet to sell drugs. From J.T.'s perspective, allowing his foot soldiers to police the stairwells served another important function: It let him see which junior members of his gang showed the potential for promotion. That's why he let guys like Creepy handle this kind

of situation. "Creepy can take the man to the clinic, or he can just drag his ass out of the building and let him be," J.T. said. "That's on him. I try not to interfere, unless he fucks up and the police come around or Ms. Easley gets pissed."

I realized this was what J.T. had done the night I first stumbled upon his foot soldiers and was held overnight in the stairwell. He had wanted to see how they handled this stranger. Did they remain calm? Did they ask the right questions? Or did they get out of control and do something to attract the attention of tenants and the police?

"So what was going on with Ms. Easley?" I asked.

"You mean why did I give her money?" J.T. said. "That's what you want to know, right?"

I nodded, a little embarrassed that he could see through my line of indirect questioning.

"Tenant Patrol runs after-school parties for kids, and they buy school supplies. I give them money for that. It keeps them off our ass."

This was the first time J.T. had mentioned having to deal with tenants who might not like his gang's behavior. I asked what Ms. Easley might not like about his gang.

"I wouldn't say that she doesn't *like* us," he said. "She just wants to know that kids can walk around and not get hurt. And she just wants to keep things safe for the women. Lot of these crackheads are looking for sex, too, and they beat up women. It gets wild up in here at night. So we try to keep things calm. That's about it. We just help them, you know, keep the peace."

"So she lets you do what you want as long as you help her deal with people causing trouble? It's a give-and-take? There's nothing that you guys do that pisses her off?"

"We just keep the peace, that's all," he muttered, and walked away.

J.T. sometimes spoke vaguely like this, which I took as a sign to

stop asking questions. At times he could be extraordinarily open about his life and his business; at other times he gave roundabout or evasive answers. It was something I'd learn to live with.

We kept climbing until we reached the top floor, the sixteenth. I followed J.T. down the hallway till we came to an apartment without a front door. J.T. told our foot soldier escort to stand guard outside. The young man nodded obediently.

Following J.T. inside, I was hit by a noxious odor of vomit, urine, and burned crack. It was so dark that I could barely see. There were several mattresses spread about, some with bodies on them, and piles of dirty clothing and fast-food wrappers. The holes in the walls were stuffed with rags to keep out the rats.

"Sudhir, come over here!" J.T. shouted. I followed a dim light that came from the rear of the apartment. "See this?" he said, pointing to a row of beat-up refrigerators. "This is where the squatters keep their food." Each fridge was draped with a heavy chain and padlock.

"Where do they get the fridges?" I asked.

"From the housing authority!" J.T. said, laughing. "The CHA managers sell fridges to the squatters for a few bucks instead of taking them back to get them fixed. *Everyone* is in on it. That's one thing you'll learn about the projects."

J.T. explained that this apartment was a "regular" squat, which meant that the people sleeping there paid the gang a rental fee and were therefore allowed to keep food and clothes inside. Ten people stayed in this apartment. A squatter known as C-Note, who had been in the community for more than two decades, was their leader. It was his duty to screen other squatters who wanted to take up quarters, help them find food and shelter, and make sure they obeyed all J.T.'s rules. "We let him run things inside," J.T. said, "as long as he pays us and does what we say."

There were other, less stable squats in the building, J.T. explained.

"We got a lot of apartments that are just basically for the hos and the crackheads. They get high and spend a few nights and then they leave. They're the ones that end up causing trouble around here. That's when the police come by, so we have to be tight with them."

Outside the squat I sat down on the gallery floor, finally able to take a clear breath. I felt overwhelmed by all the new information hitting me. I told J.T. I needed a rest. He smiled, seeming to understand, and told me he'd survey the other two buildings by himself. When I started to resist, worried I might not have this chance again, J.T. read my mind. "Don't worry, Mr. Professor. I do this every week."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "I'm beat. I'll meet you back at your place. I've got to go write some of this down."

My heart froze after I realized what I'd just said. I had never actually told J.T. that I was keeping notes on all our conversations; I always waited until we split up before writing down what had transpired. Suddenly I feared he would think about everything we'd just witnessed and discussed, including all the illegal activities, and shut me down.

But he didn't even blink.

"Shorty, take Sudhir back to Mama's place," he told the young man who'd been standing guard outside the squat. "I'll be over there in an hour."

I quietly walked down the sixteen flights of stairs and over to Ms. Mae's building. The elevators in Robert Taylor worked inconsistently at best, so the only people who bothered to wait for them were old people and mothers with small children. The foot soldier accompanied me all the way to Ms. Mae's door, but we didn't talk; I tended never to talk to foot soldiers, since they never talked to me—which led me to think they'd probably been told not to.

I wound up sitting at the living room table in Ms. Mae's apartment, writing up my notes. In a short time the apartment had be-

come the place I went whenever I needed a break or wanted to write up some field notes. J.T.'s family grew comfortable with my sitting quietly by myself or even napping on the couch if J.T. was busy.

Sometimes the apartment was peaceful and sometimes it was busy. At the moment J.T.'s cousin and her two children were staying there, as was one of J.T.'s sisters. But the living arrangements were very fluid. Like a lot of the more established households in the projects, Ms. Mae's apartment was a respite for a network of poor and needy relatives who might stay for a night, a month, or longer. Some of them weren't actually relatives at all but were "strays" who just needed a place to stay. It could be hard to sort out J.T.'s relatives from the strays. Several of his uncles, I learned, were high-ranking gang members. But I didn't even know how many siblings he had. I'd often hear him talk about "my sister" or "a brother of mine on the West Side," but I couldn't tell if these people were blood relatives or just friends of the family.

Still, they all seemed content to let me hang out at Ms. Mae's. And they all knew that J.T. didn't want me wandering through the neighborhood by myself. Sometimes Ms. Mae would wordlessly set down a plate of food for me as I wrote, her Christian radio station playing in the background. No one in the family, including J.T., ever asked to see my notes—although once in a while he'd stand over me and joke about whether I was describing him as "handsome." He loved the idea that I might be writing his biography. But in general everyone respected my privacy and let me do my work.

Eventually Ms. Mae even cleared out a space for me in the apartment to keep some clothes and books. Often, during a break from writing up my notes, I would start conversations with Ms. Mae and others in her apartment. They all seemed hesitant to answer specific questions—I'd already witnessed how tenants shied away from interviews with journalists or social workers—but they were more

than willing to explain basic aspects of their lives and their community. Like Old Time and his friends in Washington Park, they talked openly about their family histories, Chicago politics, the behavior of the CHA and other city agencies, and life in the projects. As long as I didn't get too nosy—say, by asking about their income or who was living in an apartment illegally—they talked my head off. Just as important, I found I didn't have to hide my ignorance—which wasn't hard, since I was quite naïve about politics and race in urban America. My naïveté about these basic issues actually seemed to endear me to them.

In my brief exposure to J.T. and others in his building, I had already grown dismayed by the gap between their thoughtfulness and the denigrating portrayals of the poor I'd read in sociological studies. They were generally portrayed as hapless dupes with little awareness or foresight. The hospitality that Ms. Mae showed and the tenants' willingness to teach me not only surprised me but left me feeling extraordinarily grateful. I began to think I would never be able to repay their generosity. I took some solace in the hope that if I produced good, objective academic research, it could lead to social policy improvements, which might then better their living conditions. But I also wondered how I might pay them back in a more direct fashion. Given that I was taking out student loans to get by, my options were fairly limited.

Once J.T. saw how much I enjoyed accompanying him on his surveys of the buildings, he took me along regularly. But he often had other work to do, work he didn't invite me to see. And he wasn't ready yet to turn me loose in the buildings on my own, so I generally hung out around Ms. Mae's apartment. I felt a bit like a child, always in need of a baby-sitter, but I could hardly complain about

the access I'd been granted into a world that was so radically different from anything I'd ever seen.

Ms. Mae introduced me to the many people who stopped by to visit. In their eyes I was just a student, a bit of an oddball to be sure; sometimes they jokingly called me "Mr. Professor," as they'd heard J.T. say. Several of J.T.'s aunts and cousins also lived in the building, and they warmed to me as well. They all seemed fairly close, sharing food and helping one another with errands or hanging out together on the gallery during the hot summer days.

Life on the gallery tended to be pretty lively. In the evenings families often set up a barbecue grill, pulling chairs or milk crates from their apartments to sit on. I probably could have made friends a lot more quickly if I hadn't been a vegetarian.

Little kids and teenage girls liked to tug my ponytail when I walked past. Others would chant "Gandhi" or "Julio" or "Ay-rab" in my direction. I was still enamored of the view of the city, and still nervous about the fencing that ran around the gallery.

Whenever a child ran toward the railing, I'd instinctively jump up and grab him. Once, a little boy's mother laughed at me. "Take it easy, Sudhir," she said. "Nothing's going to happen to them. It's not like the old days." In "the old days," I found out, some children did fall to their deaths off the Robert Taylor galleries, prompting the CHA to install a safety fence. But it was obvious that the first mistake had been building exterior hallways in windy, cold Chicago.

After dinner parents sent their kids inside the apartments and brought out tables and chairs, cards and poker chips, food and drink. They turned the galleries into dance floors and gambling dens; it could become carnivalesque.

I loved the nightlife on the galleries. And the tenants were generally in a good mood at night, willing to tell me about their lives if they weren't too high or too busy trying to make money. It was getting easier for me to determine when people were high. They'd stagger a bit, as if they were drunk, but their eyes sank back in their heads, giving them a look that was both dreamy and sinister.

It was hard to figure out the extent of crack use among the tenants. A lot of people pointed out that *other* people smoked crack—calling them "rock star" or "user" or "hype"—while insinuating that they themselves never did. Aside from a few older women, like J.T.'s mother, just about everyone was accused of smoking crack at one time or another.

After a while it became clear to me that crack use in the projects was much like the use of alcohol in the suburbs where I grew up: there was a small group of hard-core addicts and a much larger group of functional users who smoked a little crack a few days a week. Many of the crack users in Robert Taylor took care of their families and went about their business, but when they saved up ten or twenty dollars, they'd go ahead and get high. Over time I'd learn enough to estimate that 15 percent of the tenants were hardcore addicts while another 25 percent were casual users.

One of the first people I got to know on the gallery was named Clarisse. She was in her mid-thirties but looked considerably older. Beneath her worn and bruised skin, you could see a beautiful and thoughtful woman who nearly always had a smile ready. She worked as a prostitute in the building—"hustler" was the standard euphemism—and called herself "Clarisse the Mankiller," because, as she put it, "my love knocks 'em dead." Clarisse often hung around with J.T.'s family on their gallery. This surprised me, since I had heard J.T. and Ms. Mae openly disparage the prostitutes in their building.

"That's part of life around here," Ms. Mae had said, "but we keep

away from them and I keep the kids away from them. We don't socialize together."

One quiet evening, as J.T.'s family was getting ready to barbecue, I was leaning against the gallery fence, looking out at the dusk, when Clarisse came up beside me. "You never tell me about the kind of women you like," she said, smiling, and opened a beer. By now I was used to Clarisse teasing me about my love life.

"I told you," I said, "my girlfriend is in California."

"Then you must get lonely! Maybe Clarisse can help."

I blushed and tried to change the subject. "How long have you been in the building, and how did you get to know J.T.?"

"They never told you!" Clarisse yelped. "I knew it! They just embarrassed, they don't like to admit I'm family."

"You're part of their family?"

"Man, I'm J.T.'s cousin. That's why I'm around. I live upstairs on the fifteenth floor with my man. And I work in the building, too. I'm the one in the family they don't like to talk about, because I'm open about what I do. I'm a *very* open person—I don't hide nothing from nobody. Ms. Mae knows that. Shit, *everyone* knows it. But, like I said, they don't always come clean about it."

"How can you live *and* work in the building?" I asked.

"You see these men?" Clarisse pointed at some of the tenants along the galley, hanging out in front of their own apartments. "You should see how they treat women." I didn't understand what Clarisse meant; when she saw my face blank, she laughed. "Oh! We have a lot to talk about. Clarisse will educate you."

She then gestured toward a few women sitting on chairs. "See, all of them are hos. They all hustle. It's just that they do it quietly, like me. We have regulars, *and* we live here. We're not hypes who just come and go."

What's the difference, I asked her, between a "hype" and a "regular"?

"Regulars like me, we hustle to make our money, but we only go with guys we know. We don't do it full-time, but if we have to feed our kids, we may make a little money on the side. I got two kids I need to feed, and my man don't always help out. Then you got hypes that are just in it for the drugs. They don't live around here, but J.T. lets them work here, and they give him a cut. I don't hang around with them. They're the ones that cause trouble. Some of them have pimps, some of them work for the gang, but they're all in it for the drugs. Clarisse don't mess with drugs. And that's why a lot of people accept us—even if they say things behind our back. They know we're only trying to take care of our families, just like them."

"Are you working now?" I said.

"Baby, I'm always working if the price is right!" She laughed. "But J.T. probably don't want me working tonight, so I won't be hustling."

This confused me, since J.T. had specifically told me that his gang didn't run a prostitution racket. Most gangs didn't, he explained, since there wasn't much money to be made. Prostitutes were hard to manage and required a great deal of attention: They were constantly getting beat up and arrested, which meant long periods without income. They needed to be fed and clothed, and the ones who used drugs were notoriously unpredictable. They were also prone to stealing money.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You mean J.T. controls you?"

"No, but he told me once that if I wanted to hang out with his family, I had to play by his rules: no hustling when there's a family thing going on. Like tonight. And he runs things around here, so I *have* to play by the rules."

Even though J.T.'s gang didn't actually control the prostitutes in his buildings, Clarisse explained that he did extract a monthly fee from both the hypes and the regulars. The regulars usually paid a flat fee (anywhere from fifteen to seventy-five dollars a month), and in return the gang would beat up any johns who abused the women. The hypes, meanwhile, turned over a cut of their income (ranging from 10 to 25 percent) to J.T.'s foot soldiers, who tried to keep track of how many tricks each woman turned. Clarisse said that J.T. was actually one of the nicer gang leaders on the South Side. He regularly lent money to women, helped them get medical care, even kept a few vacant apartments for them to use as brothels. So although J.T. didn't technically run a prostitution ring, he certainly controlled the flow of prostitution on his turf and profited from it.

The conversation with Clarisse that night made me realize that I was hardly the only person in the projects whose movements were dictated by J.T.

Whenever he took me on a survey of his buildings, I'd watch him deal with the various people who hung out in lobbies, stairwells, galleries, parking lots, and playgrounds. He warned a prostitute not to hustle out in the open. He told a man selling sneakers—they looked like counterfeit Nikes—to move away from the lobby where J.T.'s gang members were selling drugs. J.T. often forbade homeless men from hanging out in the playground, especially if they were drinking. And if he spotted a stranger on the premises, he'd have one of his senior officers interrogate that person to learn his business. J.T. hardly knew every single person out of the roughly five thousand in his domain, but he usually managed to figure out whether someone was a local, and if he couldn't figure it out, he had plenty of people to ask.

All of this was accomplished with little drama. "You folks need to move this activity somewhere else," he'd say matter-of-factly. Or,

"What did I tell you about hustling in the park when kids are playing?" Or, "You can't stay in this apartment unless you deal with Creepy first." I saw a few people resist, but none for any great length of time. Most of them seemed to respect his authority, or at least fear it.

In most of the sociological literature I'd read about gangs—they had been part of the urban fabric in the United States since at least the late nineteenth century—the gang almost always had heated relationships with parents, shopkeepers, social workers, and the police. It was portrayed as a nuisance at best, and more typically a major menace.

J.T.'s gang seemed different. It acted as the de facto administration of Robert Taylor: J.T. may have been a lawbreaker, but he was very much a lawmaker as well. He acted as if his organization truly did rule the neighborhood, and sometimes the takeover was complete. The Black Kings policed the buildings more aggressively than the Chicago police did. By controlling lobbies and parking lots, the BKs made it hard for tenants to move about freely. Roughly once a month, they held a weekend basketball tournament. This meant that the playgrounds and surrounding areas got thoroughly spruced up, with J.T. sponsoring a big neighborhood party—but it also meant that other tenants sometimes had to call off their own softball games or picnics at J.T.'s behest.

Over time J.T. became less reluctant to leave me alone in Robert Taylor. Occasionally he'd just go off on an errand and shout, "Hey, shorty, watch out for Sudhir. I'll be back." I generally didn't stray too far, but I did start up conversations with people outside the gang. That's how I first began to understand the complicated dynamic between the gang and the rest of the community.

One day, for instance, I ran into C-Note, the leader of the squatters, installing an air conditioner in Ms. Mae's apartment. C-Note was

a combination handyman and hustler. For five or ten dollars, he'd fix a refrigerator or TV. For a few dollars more, he'd find an ingenious way to bring free electricity and gas into your home. When it came to home repair, there didn't seem much that C-Note couldn't, or wouldn't, do.

After he finished work at Ms. Mae's, I sat with C-Note on the gallery and had a beer. He told me that he had lived in the building for years and held various legitimate blue-collar jobs, but after being laid off several times he had lost his lease and become a squatter. He always found a little work and a place to sleep in J.T.'s building. He stayed out of people's way, he told me. He didn't make noise, didn't use drugs, and wasn't violent. He got his nickname, he explained, because "I got a hundred ways to make a hundred bucks."

I learned that a lot of tenants welcomed C-Note into their homes for dinner, let him play with their children, and gave him money for medicine or a ride to the hospital if he was hurt. But this began to change once J.T. moved his operations back into Robert Taylor. J.T. saw squatters as a source of income, not as charity cases. Nor was he pleased that C-Note was in the good graces of tenants, some of whom lobbied J.T. not to tax C-Note's earnings. Even J.T.'s mother was on C-Note's side in this matter.

But J.T. wasn't one to compromise when it came to money. He had to pay for the upkeep of a few cars as well as several girlfriends, each of whom needed her own apartment and spending allowance. J.T. also liked to go gambling in Las Vegas, and he took no small amount of pride in the fact that he owned dozens of pairs of expensive shoes and lots of pricey clothing. But instead of acting charitably toward someone like C-Note, J.T. was openly resentful of the idea that he was getting a free ride.

One hot Sunday morning, I was hanging out with C-Note and

some other squatters in the parking lot of J.T.'s building, across the street from a basketball court. The men had set up an outdoor auto-repair shop—changing tires, pounding out dents, performing minor engine repairs. Their prices were low, and they had lined up enough business to keep them going all day. Cars were parked at every angle in the lot. The men moved to and fro, hauling equipment, swapping tools, and chattering happily at the prospect of so much work. Another squatter had set up a nearby stand to sell soda and juice out of a cooler. I bought a drink and sat down to watch the underground economy in full bloom.

J.T. drove up, accompanied by four of his senior officers. Three more cars pulled up behind them, and I recognized several other gang leaders, J.T.'s counterparts who ran the other local Black Kings factions.

J.T. walked over to C-Note, who was peering into a car engine. J.T. didn't notice me—I was sitting by a white van, partially hidden from view—but I could see and hear him just fine.

"C-Note!" J.T. yelled. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"What the fuck does it look like I'm doing, young man?" C-Note barked right back without looking up from his work. C-Note wasn't usually quarrelsome, but he could be a hard-liner when it came to making his money.

"We have games running today," J.T. said. He meant the gang's monthly basketball tournament. "You need to get this shit out of here. Move the cars, get all this stuff off the court."

"Aw, shit, you should've told me." C-Note threw an oily cloth to the ground. "What the fuck can I do? You see that the work ain't finished."

J.T. laughed. He seemed surprised that someone would challenge him. "Nigger, are you kidding me?! I don't give a fuck about your

work. Get these cars out of here." J.T. looked underneath the cars. "Oh, shit! And you got oil all over the place. You better clean that up, too."

C-Note started waving his hands about and shouting at J.T. "You're the only one who can make money, is that right? You own all this shit, you own all this land? Bullshit."

He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and kept muttering, "Bullshit." The other squatters stopped working to see what would happen next. C-Note was drenched in sweat and angry, as if he might lose control.

J.T. looked down at his feet, then waved over his senior officers, who had been waiting by the car. A few of the other gang members also got out of their cars.

Once his henchmen were near, J.T. spoke again to C-Note: "I'm asking you one more time, nigger. You can either move this car or—"

"That's some bullshit, boy!" C-Note yelled. "I ain't going anywhere. I been here for two hours, and I told you I ain't finished working. So fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!" He turned to the other squatters. "This nigger do this every time," he said. "Every time. Fuck him."

C-Note was still chattering when J.T. grabbed him by the neck. In an instant two of J.T.'s officers also grabbed C-Note. The three of them dragged him toward a concrete wall that separated Robert Taylor from the tracks where a commuter train ran. C-Note kept shouting, but he didn't physically resist. The other squatters turned to watch. The gang leaders nonchalantly took some sodas from the cooler without paying.

"You can't do this to us!" C-Note shouted. "It ain't fair."

J.T. pushed C-Note up against the concrete wall. The two officers, their muscular arms plastered with tattoos, pinned him in.

"I told you, nigger," J.T. said, his face barely an inch away from C-Note's, "but you just don't listen, do you?" He sounded exasperated, but there was also a sinister tone to his voice I'd never heard before. "Why are you making this harder?"

He started slapping C-Note on the side of the head, grunting with each slap, C-Note's head flopping back and forth like a toy.

"Fuck you!" C-Note shouted. He tried to turn to look J.T. in the eye, but J.T. was so close that C-Note butted the side of J.T.'s head with his own. This only irked J.T. more. He cocked his arm and pounded C-Note in the ribs. C-Note held his gut, coughing violently, and then J.T.'s henchmen pushed him to the ground. They took turns kicking him, one in the back and the other in the stomach. When C-Note curled up, they kicked him in the legs. "You should've listened to the man, fool!" one of them shouted.

C-Note lay in a fetal position, struggling to catch his breath. J.T. rolled him over and punched him in the face one last time. "Dumb nigger!" he shouted, then walked back toward us, head down, flexing his hand as if he had hurt it on C-Note's skull.

J.T. reached into the squatter's cooler for a soda. That's when he finally noticed me standing there. He frowned when our eyes met. He quickly moved away, going toward the high-rise, but his look gave me a chill. He was clearly surprised to see me, and he seemed a little peeved.

I had been hanging around J.T. and his gang for several months by now, and I'd never seen J.T. engage in violence. I felt like his scribe, tailing a powerful leader who liked to joke with the tenants and, when he needed to be assertive, did so quietly. I was naïve, I suppose, but I had somehow persuaded myself that just because I hadn't seen any violence, it didn't exist. Now I *had* seen a different side of his power, a far less polished presentation.

In the weeks afterward, I began to contemplate the possibility that

I would see more beatings, perhaps even fatal incidents. I still felt exhilarated by my access to J.T.'s gang, but I was also starting to feel shame. My conviction that I was merely a sociological observer, detached and objective, was starting to feel false. Was I really supposed to just stand by while someone was getting beat up? I was ashamed of my desire to get so close to the violence, so close to a culture that I knew other scholars had not managed to see.

In reality I probably had little power to stop anyone from getting abused by the gang. And for the first time in my life, I was doing work that I truly loved; I was excited by my success. Back at the university, my research was starting to attract attention from my professors, and I certainly didn't want to let that go. I told Wilson about the young men I had met and their involvement with gangs. I kept things pretty abstract; I didn't tell him every detail about what I saw. He seemed impressed, and I didn't want to lose his support, so I figured that if I could forget about the shame, maybe it would simply go away.

As time passed, I pretty much stopped talking about my research to friends and family. I just wrote down my notes and tried not to draw attention to myself, except to tell my advisers a few stories now and then.

When I went home to California on vacations or holidays and saw my parents, I told them relatively little about my work in the projects. My mother, who worked as a hospital records clerk, was already worried about my living so far from home, so I didn't want to heighten her concern with stories of gang beatings. And I knew that my father would be upset if he learned that I hid things from my advisers. So I hid my fieldwork from him as well. Instead I just showed them my grades, which were good, and said the least I could get away with.

In retrospect the C-Note beating at least enabled me to view my

relationship with J.T. more realistically. It made me appreciate just how deeply circumscribed my interactions with the Black Kings had been. What I had taken to be a fly-on-the-wall vantage point was in fact a highly edited view. It wasn't that I was seeing a false side of the gang, but there was plainly a great deal I didn't have access to. I knew that the gang made a lot of money in a lot of different ways—I had heard, for instance, that they extorted store owners—but I knew few details. All I saw was the flashy consumption: the jewelry, the cars, the parties.

And the gang obviously had an enormous impact on the wider community. It went well beyond telling residents they couldn't hang out in the lobby. The C-Note beating made that clear. But if I was really going to write my dissertation on gang activity, I'd have to learn an awful lot more about how the gang affected everyone else in the community. The problem was figuring the way out from under J.T.'s grip.

THREE

Someone to Watch Over Me

C-Note's friends took him to the hospital, where he received treatment for bruised ribs and cuts on his face. He spent the next couple of months recuperating in the apartment of a friend who lived nearby. Eventually he moved back into Robert Taylor. The building was as much his home as J.T.'s, and no one expected the beating to drive him away for good.

I wondered how J.T. would react the next time I saw him. Up to that point, he was always happy to have me follow him around, to have a personal biographer. "He's writing about my life," he'd boast to his friends. "If you-all could read, you'd learn something." He had no real sense of what I would actually be writing—because, in truth, I didn't know myself. Nor did I know if he'd be upset with me for having seen him beat up C-Note, or if perhaps he'd try to censor me.

I didn't return to Robert Taylor for a week, until J.T. called to invite me to a birthday party for his four-year-old daughter, Shug-

gie. She was one of two daughters that J.T. had with his girlfriend Joyce; the other girl, Bee-Bee, was two. J.T. and Joyce seemed pretty close. But then again J.T. also seemed close with Missie and their son, Jamel. As much as J.T. seemed to trust me and let me inside his world, he was fiercely protective of his private life. Except for benign occasions like a birthday party, he generally kept me away from his girlfriends and his children, and he often gave me blatantly contradictory information about his family life. I once tried asking why he was so evasive on that front, but he just shut me down with a hard look.

I was nervous as I rode the bus toward Robert Taylor, but my reunion with J.T. was anticlimactic. The party was so big, with dozens of friends and family members, that it was split between Ms. Mae's apartment and another apartment upstairs where J.T.'s cousin LaShona lived. Ms. Mae had cooked a ton of food, and there was a huge birthday cake. Everyone was having a good, loud time.

J.T. strode right over and shook my hand. "How you feel?" he asked—one of his standard greetings. He stared me down for a moment but said nothing more. Then he winked, handed me a beer, and walked away. I barely saw him the rest of the party. Ms. Mae introduced me to some of her friends—I was "Mr. Professor, J.T.'s friend," which conferred immediate legitimacy upon me. I stayed a few hours, played some games with the kids, and then took the bus home.

J.T. and I resumed our normal relationship. Even though I couldn't stop thinking about the C-Note beating, I kept my questions to myself. Until that incident I had seen gang members selling drugs, tenants taking drugs, and plenty of people engaged in small-time hustles to make money. While I was by no means comfortable watching a drug addict smoke crack, the C-Note affair gave me

greater pause. He was an old man in poor health; he could hardly be expected to defend himself against men twice his size and half his age, men who also happened to carry guns.

What was I, an impartial observer—at least that's how I thought of myself—supposed to do upon seeing something like this? I actually considered calling the police that day. After all, C-Note had been assaulted. But I didn't do anything. I am ashamed to say that I didn't even confront J.T. about it until some six months later, and even then I did so tentatively.

The confrontation happened after I witnessed another incident with another squatter. One day I was standing outside the building's entryway with J.T. and a few other BKs. J.T. had just finished his weekly walk-through of his high-rise. He was having a quick meeting with some prostitutes who'd recently started working in the building, explaining the rules and taxes. The tenants, meanwhile, went about their business—hauling laundry, checking the mail, running errands.

A few of J.T.'s junior members came out to tell him that one of the squatters in the building, a man known as Brass, refused to pay the gang's squatting fee. They had brought Brass with them down to the lobby. I could see him through the entryway. He looked to be in his late forties, but it was hard to say. He had only a few teeth and seemed in pretty bad shape. I'd heard that Brass was a heroin addict with a reputation for beating up prostitutes. He was also known for moving around from building to building. He wasn't a regular squatter like C-Note, who was on familiar terms with all the tenants. Brass would anger the tenants in one building and then pack up and move along.

J.T. dispatched Price, one of his senior officers, to deal with Brass. Unlike C-Note, who offered only a little resistance, Brass decided to

fight back. This was a big mistake. Price was generally not a patient man, and he seemed to enjoy administering a good beating. I could see Price punching Brass repeatedly in the face and stomach. J.T. didn't flinch. Everyone, in fact—gang members and tenants alike—just stood and watched.

Brass started to crawl toward us, making his way outside to the building's concrete entryway. Price looked exhausted from hitting Brass, and he took a break. That's when some rank-and-file gang members took over, kicking and beating Brass mercilessly. Brass resisted throughout. He kept yelling "Fuck you!" even as he was being beaten, until he seemed unconscious. A drool of blood spilled from his mouth.

Then he began flailing about on the ground in convulsion, his spindly arms flapping like wings. By now his body lay just a few feet from us. I groaned, and J.T. pulled me away. Still no one came to help Brass; it was as if we were all fishermen watching a fish die a slow death on the floor of a boat.

I leaned on J.T.'s car, quivering from the shock. He took hold of me firmly and tried to calm me down. "It's just the way it is around here," he whispered, a discernible tone of sympathy in his voice. "Sometimes you have to beat a nigger to teach him a lesson. Don't worry, you'll get used to it after a while."

I thought, *No, I don't want to get used to it.* If I did, what kind of person would that make me? I wanted to ask J.T. to stop the beating and take Brass to the hospital, but my ears were ringing, and I couldn't even focus on what he was telling me. My eyes were fixed on Brass, and I felt like throwing up.

Then J.T. grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me away so I couldn't watch. But out of the corner of my eye, I could see that a few tenants finally came over to help Brass, while the gang members just stood over him doing nothing. J.T. held me up, as if to comfort me. I tried instead to support my weight on his car.

That's when C-Note slipped into my thoughts.

"I understand that Brass didn't pay you the money he owed, but you guys beat up C-Note and he wasn't doing anything," I said impatiently. "I just don't get it."

"C-Note was challenging my authority," J.T. answered calmly. "I had told him months before he couldn't do his work out there, and he told me he understood. He went back on his word, and I had to do what I had to do."

I pushed a little harder. "Couldn't you just punish them with a tax?"

"Everyone wants to kill the leader, so you got to get them first." This was one of J.T.'s trademark sayings. "I had niggers watching me," he said. "I had to do what I had to do."

I recalled that on the day C-Note challenged him, J.T. had driven up to the building with a few Black Kings leaders from other neighborhoods. J.T. was constantly worried—practically to the point of paranoia, it seemed to me—that his own members and fellow leaders wanted to dethrone him and claim his territory. So he may have felt he couldn't afford to have his authority challenged in their presence, even by a senior citizen whose legs probably couldn't buy him one lap around a high-school track. Still, J.T.'s explanation seemed so alien to me that I felt I was watching a scene from *The Godfather.*

By now it was nearly a year since I'd started hanging out with J.T.'s gang. It was 1990, which was roughly the peak of the crack epidemic in Chicago and other big U.S. cities. Black and Latino gangs including the Kings, the Cobras, the Disciples, the Vice Lords, the

MCs (Mickey Cobras), and even the Stones, which had been temporarily dismantled a few years earlier, were capitalizing on a huge demand for crack and making a lot of money.

In the old days, a teenager with an appetite for trouble might have gotten involved in vandalism or shoplifting; now he was more likely to be involved in the drug trade. And the neighbor who might have yelled at that misbehaving teenager in the old days was less likely to do so, since that kid might well be carrying a gun.

Politicians, academics, and law-enforcement officials all offered policy solutions, to little avail. The liberal-minded deployed their traditional strategies—getting young people back into school and finding them entry-level jobs—but few gang members were willing to trade in their status and the prospect of big money for menial work. Conservatives attacked the crack epidemic by supporting mass arrests and hefty prison sentences. This certainly took some dealers off the streets, but there was always a surplus of willing and eager replacements.

The national mood had grown increasingly desperate—and punitive. Prosecutors won the right to treat gangs as organized criminal groups, which produced longer prison sentences. Judges gave the police permission to conduct warrantless searches and to round up suspected gang members who were hanging out in public spaces. In schools, mayors ruled out the wearing of bandannas and other clothing that might signal gang affiliation. With each day's newspaper bringing a fresh story about gang violence, these efforts met little political resistance, even if they weren't all that effective.

From J.T.'s perspective the real crisis was that all these measures conspired to make it harder to earn as much money as he would have liked.

Because crack was sold on street corners, with profits dependent on high volume and quick turnover, J.T. had to monitor a round-

the-clock economic operation. He loved the challenge of running a business and making money. From all indications his transition to the Robert Taylor Homes was an unqualified success. This had won the attention of his superiors, a group of several dozen people in prison and on the streets known collectively as the Black Kings' board of directors. They had begun inviting J.T. to high-level meetings to discuss the big picture of their enterprise. Pleased with his managerial prowess and attention to detail, they rewarded J.T. with extra responsibilities. He had just been asked, for instance, to help the gang with its foray into Chicago politics.

"Even the gang needs friends with connections," J.T. told me. "And we're getting more successful, so we need more friends."

"I don't see why a gang wants to deal with politicians," I said. "I don't see what they get out of it. It seems they'd have a greater chance of getting caught if they started hanging out with politicos, no?"

He reminded me that his Black Kings gang was just one of about two hundred BK gangs around the city that were making money selling crack. With that much money, the citywide BK leadership needed to think about investing and laundering.

"Let's say, Sudhir, that you're making only a hundred bucks," he explained. "You probably don't have a lot of real headaches. You don't need to worry about niggers stealing it from you. You don't need to worry that when you go into a store, they'll ask you where you got the money. But let's say you got a thousand bucks. Well, you can't really carry it around, and you're a street nigger so you don't have a bank account. You need to keep it somewhere. So you start to have things to think about.

"Now let's say it's ten thousand. Okay, now you got niggers who are watching you buy a few things: a new TV, a new car. They say, 'Oh, Sudhir, he's got a new necklace. And he's a student. He don't

work? So where'd he get the money? Maybe he has cash in his house.' So now you have more things to worry about.

"Now let's say it's a hundred thousand. You want to buy a car, but the car dealer has to report to the government when people pay for a car with thirty thousand dollars in cash. So what are you going to do? You may have to pay him a thousand bucks to keep his mouth shut. Then maybe you need to hire security, 'cause there's always some nigger that's going to take the chance and rob you. That's another few thousand, and you got to trust the security you hired, 'cause they know where you keep the money.

"Now let's say you got five hundred thousand or a million. Or more. That's what these niggers above me are worrying about. They need to find ways to clean the money. Maybe they hide it in a friend's business. Maybe they tell their sisters to open up bank accounts. Or they get their church to take a donation. They have to constantly be thinking about the money: keeping it safe, investing it, protecting themselves from other niggers."

"But I still don't understand why you need to deal with politicians."

"Well, see, an alderman can take the heat off of us," J.T. said with a smile. "An alderman can keep the police away. He can make sure residents don't get too pissed off at us. Let's say we need to meet in the park. The alderman makes sure the cops don't come. And the only thing they want from us is a donation—ten thousand dollars gets you an alderman for a year. Like I keep telling you, our organization is about helping our community, so we're trying to get involved in what's happening."

J.T.'s monologue surprised me on two fronts. Although I'd heard about corrupt aldermen in the old days—denying building permits to political enemies, for instance, or protecting a gang's gambling

racket—I had a hard time believing that J.T. could buy off a politician as easily as he described. Even more surprising was J.T.'s claim about "helping our community." Was this a joke, I wondered, or did he really believe that selling drugs and bribing politicians would somehow help a down-and-out neighborhood pick itself up?

Besides the Black Kings' relationships with various aldermen, J.T. told me, the gang also worked with several community-based organizations, or CBOs. These groups, many of them created with federal funding during the 1960s, worked to bring jobs and housing to the neighborhood, tried to keep kids off the street with recreation programs, and, in places like the South Side, even enacted truces between warring gangs.

Toward the end of the 1980s, several CBOs tried instilling civic consciousness in the gangs themselves. They hired outreach workers (most of whom were former gangsters) to persuade young gang members to reject the thug life and choose a more productive path. These reformers held life-skills workshops that addressed such issues as "how to act when you go downtown" or "what to do when a lady yells at you for drinking beer in the park." They also preached the gospel of voting, arguing that a vote represented the first step toward reentry into the social mainstream. J.T. and some other gang leaders not only required their young members to attend these workshops but also made them participate in voter-registration drives. Their motives were by no means purely altruistic or educational: they knew that if their rank-and-file members had good relationships with local residents, the locals were less likely to call the police and disrupt the drug trade.

J.T.'s ambitions ran even higher. What he wanted, he told me, was to return the gang to its glory days of the 1960s, when South Side gangs worked together with residents to agitate for improvements in

their neighborhoods. But he seemed to conveniently ignore a big difference: Gangs back then didn't traffic in drugs, extort money from businesses, and terrorize the neighborhood with violence. They were not innocent kids, to be sure. But their worst transgressions tended to be street fighting or intimidating passersby. Because J.T.'s gang *was* involved in drugs and extortion (and more), I was skeptical that he could enjoy much more support from the local residents than he currently had.

One cold November night, J.T. invited me to a meeting at a small storefront Baptist church. An ex-gangster named Lenny Duster would be teaching young people about the rights, responsibilities, and power of voting. The next election, while a full year away, would place in office a great many state legislators as well as city aldermen.

Lenny ran a small organization called Pride, which helped mediate gang wars. About a hundred young Black Kings attended the meeting, held in a small room at the rear of the church. They were quiet and respectful, although they had the look of teenagers who'd been told that attendance was mandatory.

Lenny was about six foot four, built lean and muscular. He was about forty years old, with streaks of blond hair, and he walked with a limp. "You-all need to see where the power is!" Lenny shouted to the assembly, striding about like a Caesar. "J.T. went to college, I earned a degree in prison. You-all are dropping out of school, and you're ignorant. You can't read, you can't think, you can't understand where the power comes from. It don't come from that gun you got—it comes from what's in your head. And it comes from the vote. You can change the world if you get the niggers that are coming down on you out of power. Think about it: No more police

stopping you, no more abandoned buildings. You control your destiny!"

He talked to the young men about how to "work" responsibly. It was understood among gang members that "work" meant selling drugs—a tragic irony in that they referred to working in the legitimate economy as "getting a job," not "work."

"You-all are outside, so you need to respect who else is around you," he said. "If you're in a park working, leave the ladies alone. Don't be working around the children. That just gets the mamas mad. If you see kids playing, take a break and then get back to work. Remember, what you do says a lot about the Black Kings. You have to watch your image, take pride in yourself.

"You are not just foot soldiers in the Black Kings," he continued. "You are foot soldiers in the *community.* You will register to vote today, but then you must all go out and register the people in your buildings. And when elections come around, we'll tell you who to vote for and you'll tell them. That's an important duty you have when you belong to this organization."

For my classes at the U of C, I'd been reading about the history of the Chicago political machine, whose leaders—white and black alike—were famous for practicing the dark arts of ballot stuffing, bribery, and yes, predelivered voting blocs. Like his predecessors, Lenny did give these young men a partial understanding of the right to vote, and why it was important, but it seemed that the main point of the meetings was to tell them how to be cogs in a political machine. He held up a small placard with the names of candidates whom the gang was supporting for alderman and state legislator. There was no discussion of a platform, no list of vital issues. Just an insistence that the young men round up tenants in the projects and tell them how to vote.

When Lenny finished, J.T. told his young members they could leave. I sat for a while with J.T. and Lenny. Lenny looked drained. As he drank a Coke, he said he'd been speaking to at least four or five groups every day.

Lenny was careful to explain that his fees came from personal donations from gang members or their leaders. He wanted to distinguish these monies from the profits the gang made from selling drugs. In theory, I understood that Lenny was trying to convince me that he didn't accept drug money, but I found the distinction almost meaningless. Moreover, the gang leaders had a lot of incentive to pay Lenny to keep their gangs from fighting one another. After all, it was hard to conduct commerce in the midst of a gang war. Younger gang members, however, often wanted to stir things up, mostly to distinguish themselves as fighters. That's why some gang leaders even paid Lenny to discipline their own members. "*Disciplination* is an art form," Lenny said. "One thing I like is to hang a nigger upside down over the freeway as the cars come. Ain't never had a nigger misbehave after I try that one."

J.T. and Lenny talked in nostalgic terms about the gang's recent political engagement. Lenny proudly recalled his own days as a Black King back in the 1970s, describing how he helped get out the vote for "the Eye-talians and Jews" who ran his community. He then described, with equal pride, how the gangs "kicked the Eye-talian and Jewish mafia" out of his ward. Lenny even managed to spin the black takeover of the heroin trade as a boon to the community: it gave local black men jobs, albeit illegal ones, that had previously gone to white men. Lenny also boasted that black drug dealers never sold to children, whereas the previous dealers had exercised no such moral restraint. With all his bombast, he sounded like an older version of J.T.

I asked Lenny about his talk that night, how he could simultaneously preach the virtues of voting and the most responsible

way to deal drugs. He said he favored a "nonjudgmental approach" with the gang members. "I tell them, 'Whatever you do, try to do it without pissing people off. Make everything a community thing.' "

About two weeks later, I got to witness this "community thing" in action. I followed four young Black Kings as they went door-to-door in J.T.'s building to register voters.

Shorty-Lee, a twenty-one-year-old gang member, was the head of the delegation. For about an hour, I trailed him on his route. Most of his knocks went unanswered. The few tenants who did sign their names looked as if they just wanted to make the gang members leave as quickly as possible.

At one apartment on the twelfth floor, a middle-aged woman answered the door. She was wearing an apron and wiping her wet hands on a dish towel; she looked surprised to see Shorty-Lee and the others. Door-to-door solicitation hadn't been practiced in the projects for a long time. "We're here to sign you up to vote," Shorty-Lee said.

"Young man, I *am* registered," the woman said calmly.

"No, we didn't say *register*!" Shorty-Lee shouted. "We said *sign up.* I don't care if you're registered."

"But that's what I'm saying." The woman eyed Shorty-Lee curiously. "I already signed up. I'm going to vote in the next primary."

Shorty-Lee was puzzled. He looked over to the three other BKs. They were toting spiral-bound notebooks in which they "signed up" potential voters. But it seemed that neither Lenny nor J.T. had told them that there was an actual registration form and that registrars had to be licensed.

"Look, you need to sign right here," Shorty-Lee said, grabbing

one of the notebooks. He was clearly not expecting even this minor level of resistance. "And then we'll tell you who you're going to vote for when the time comes."

"Who I'm going to vote for!" The woman's voice grew sharp. She approached the screen door to take a better look. As she glanced at me, she waved—I recognized her from several parties at J.T.'s mother's apartment. Then she turned back to Shorty-Lee. "You can't tell me who to vote for," she said. "And I don't think that's legal anyway."

"Black Kings say who you need to vote for," Shorty-Lee countered, but he was growing tentative. He turned to his fellow gang members. "Ain't that right? Ain't that what we're supposed to do?" The others shrugged.

"Young man," the woman continued, "have *you* ever voted?"

Shorty-Lee looked at the others, who seemed quite interested in his answer. Then he looked at me. He seemed embarrassed. "No," he said. "I ain't voted yet. But I will."

"Did you know that you can't take anyone in the voting booth with you?" the woman asked him.

"Naw, that's a lie," Shorty-Lee said, puffing out his chest. "They told me that we'll all be voting together. Black Kings vote together. I told you that we'd be telling you who—"

"No, no, no—that's not what I mean," she interrupted. "I mean, first *you* vote. Then your friend votes, and then he votes—if he's old enough." She was staring now at the youngest boy in the group, a new gang member who looked about twelve years old.

"I'm old enough," the boy said, insulted.

"You have to be eighteen," the woman said with a gentle smile. "How old *are* you?"

"I'm Black Kings!" he cried out. "I can vote if I want to."

"Well, you'll probably have to wait," the woman said, by now exasperated. "And, boys, I got food cooking, so I can't talk to you right now. But if you come back, I can tell you all about voting. Okay? It's probably the most important thing you'll do with your life. Next to raising a family."

"Okay." Shorty-Lee shrugged, defeated.

The others also nodded. "Yes, ma'am," one of them muttered, and they walked off. I waved good-bye to the woman, who smiled as if she'd won the victory of a small-town schoolteacher: a promise that her children would learn.

I followed Shorty-Lee and the others down the gallery. None of them seemed to know what should happen next. Shorty-Lee looked pained, struggling to muster some leadership capacity and perhaps save face.

"You know you can't register people until five o'clock?" I said, wanting to break the silence. I was only a few years older than Shorty-Lee, but I found myself feeling strangely parental. "That's what J.T. told me."

J.T. hadn't told me to say this. But I felt so bad for Shorty-Lee that I wanted to give him an out. I figured I could talk to him later, when we were alone, and explain how registration actually worked.

Shorty-Lee gazed out silently through the gallery's chain-link fence.

"It's about two-thirty," I said. "That's probably why the woman said what she said. You should wait awhile before knocking some more. You'll get more people signed up if you wait. Why don't we go to Ms. Turner's and get some hamburgers? You can start again later."

"Yeah, that's cool," Shorty-Lee said, looking relieved. "I'm hungry, too!" He started barking out commands. "Blackie, you got to get

back home, though. We'll get you some food. Kenny, hold my shit. Follow me. I'm getting a cheeseburger, if she still has any cheese left."

They ran off toward Ms. Turner's apartment, a makeshift store on the seventh floor where you could buy food, candy, soda, cigarettes, and condoms. I headed back to Ms. Mae's apartment, trying to think of how to tell J.T. about this "voter-registration drive" without laughing.

The door-to-door canvassing was thankfully just a small part of J.T.'s strategy to politicize the gang. I began attending dozens of rallies in high schools and social-service centers where politicians came to encourage young black men and women to get involved in politics. Newspaper reporters often attended these events. I'm sure they were interested in the gang's involvement, but their curiosity was also piqued by the participation of politicians like the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who urged young people to "give up the gun, pick up the ballot."

J.T. told me he never wanted to run for office, but he was certainly attracted to the new contacts he was gaining through the Black Kings' political initiatives. He talked endlessly about the preachers, politicians, and businesspeople he'd been meeting. J.T. knew that Chicago's gangs were politically active in the 1960s and 1970s, pushing for desegregation and housing reform. He told me more than a few times that he was modeling his behavior on those gang leaders'. When I asked for concrete examples of his collaboration with his new allies, he'd vaguely say that "we're working together for the community" or "we're just trying to make things right."

Perhaps, I thought, he didn't trust me yet, or perhaps there *wasn't* anything concrete to talk about. One of the few political activities I saw him directly manage was a series of educational meetings between Lenny Duster of Pride and various high-ranking Chicago

gang leaders. Because the police rarely came around to Robert Taylor, it provided a relatively secure site for such meetings. This kept J.T. busy with providing security, keeping tenants out of the way, and otherwise ensuring a safe climate.

He firmly believed that the community would be stronger when the Black Kings entered the mainstream. "You need to talk about our political activities in your work," he told me. "It's part of who I am."

But he also admitted that the "legit" image was vital to the gang's underlying commercial mission: if law-abiding citizens viewed the gang as a politically productive enterprise, they might be less likely to complain about its drug sales. So J.T. continued to order his rank-and-file members to attend these political rallies, and he donated money to social organizations that called for gang members to turn their lives around. More than anything, I realized, J.T. was desperate to be recognized as something other than just a criminal.

I wasn't sure that I believed him. I had trouble seeing exactly how the Black Kings were a useful group to have around. But they did seem to have a few noncriminal ventures, and perhaps, I thought, I would see more down the line. By this point I had gotten a reputation around the U of C as "the Indian guy who hangs out with the gangs." In general this was a positive image, and I saw little reason to change things.

The more time J.T. spent with the citywide Black Kings leadership and their newfound political allies, the less time he had to escort me through the projects. This presented me with the opportunity I'd hoped for: getting to learn a bit more about the community for myself without J.T. watching over me.

Since I still wasn't very familiar with the neighborhood, I didn't

stray too far from J.T.'s building. He had repeatedly told me that I wouldn't be safe walking around other parts of Robert Taylor. The longer I hung around the projects, he said, the more likely that I would be associated with his gang. So I would do well to keep to the gang's areas.

Strangely, while most people think of a gang as a threat, for me—an uninitiated person in the projects—the gang represented security. The courtyard in the middle of the three buildings that J.T. controlled was a closely guarded space. His gang members were everywhere: sitting in cars, leaning out of apartments, hanging around the playground and the parking lot. I didn't know most of them well enough to strike up a conversation, but I was familiar enough to receive the local sign for "friend"—a slight nod of the head, perhaps a raised eyebrow.

I wanted to learn more about the gang's influence on the greater community. C-Note and Clarisse had both suggested to me that the gang was simultaneously a nuisance, a source of fear, and an ally. But they were always a bit cagey.

"Oh, you know how J.T. is," Clarisse once said to me. "He's family, and you know what family is like."

"Them niggers are wearing me out, but I ain't gonna be the one to say nothing," C-Note told me, " 'cause they keep things safe around here."

They tended to look at me as if I knew exactly what they meant, which I didn't. But I was eager to figure it out.

I met the Johnson brothers, Kris and Michael, two Robert Taylor tenants known as expert car mechanics and consummate hustlers. They were both in their late thirties, skinny, with boyish faces, and they always had a positive outlook. Kris had been a promising baseball player until his career was ended by injury. Michael was a musician who'd never gained the level of success he sought. Now they

both wanted good full-time jobs but couldn't find steady work. Their lives had been an odyssey of drug addiction, street hustling, jail time, and homelessness. For them, and other underemployed men like them, the projects were a refuge: a familiar home turf with at least a few slivers of opportunity.

These days the Johnson brothers repaired cars in various parking lots around the Robert Taylor Homes. Although J.T. was the ultimate authority in the neighborhood, Kris and Michael also had to strike a deal with C-Note, who was the nominal ruler of the local auto-repair trade. Sometimes C-Note did repair work himself. When he was too tired, he subcontracted it out to people like the Johnson brothers. In return he took a small cut of their profits and let the gang know that the Johnsons were operating with his blessing.

Kris and Michael had set up shop on Federal Street, in the corner of a parking lot littered with garbage and broken glass. About twenty yards down the street, next to an open fire hydrant, they were also running a car wash. The Johnson brothers always attracted a crowd.

"You want me to talk?" Kris asked me. "Then you need to find me some work, find me a customer!"

I was happy to oblige. Walking into the middle of Federal Street, I helped them flag down cars. Then Kris would approach the driver. "You need a wash?" he'd ask. Or, "Looks like your brakes are squeaking, ma'am. Why don't you step outside and let me take a look." Kris and Michael would charm the drivers until they broke down and agreed to have their cars looked at. If that failed, one brother would let the air out of the tires while the other brother occupied the driver. The more beer they drank, the more creative they became.

Toward the end of one hot summer day, T-Bone, one of J.T.'s senior officers, drove up to the car wash in a bright green Chevy Malibu. The Malibu seemed to be the thug's car of choice. Behind

T-Bone was a line of cars waiting for a wash, most of them classic gang vehicles—Malibus, Caprices, Lincoln Town Cars—all with shiny rims and bright paint jobs.

"Every week we need to wash their shit," Michael muttered. "What can you do?" The gang apparently taxed the brothers in the form of free car washes. He grabbed a bucket of soapy water and shouted for Kris to come help. But Kris, his head buried in the hood of a customer's car, shouted back that he was busy. So I offered to help.

When T-Bone saw me jog over with some clean rags, he nearly fell down laughing. "Oh, shit! Next thing he'll be moving in with them!" he said. "Hey, Sweetness, how much you paying the Professor?"

"Ain't paying nothing," answered Michael (a.k.a. Sweetness, apparently). "I'm giving him an education."

This made T-Bone laugh even harder. T-Bone and I got along pretty well, and unlike other members of the gang, he would routinely strike up a conversation with me. He was attending Kennedy-King College, a South Side community college, majoring in accounting. That's why J.T. had put him in charge of the gang's finances. T-Bone had two talkative, precocious children and the appearance of a nerd: he wore big, metal-framed glasses, always carried a notebook (which contained the gang's financial records, I would later learn), and constantly asked me about life at the U of C. "Hope it's harder than where I'm at," he'd say. "I'm getting A's, and I haven't had to pay nobody off yet!"

A commotion rose up from the parking lot where Kris was working: he had gotten into a fight with a customer. Even from afar I could see the veins popping on Kris's face. He kept trying to grab the other man's neck, and the other man kept pushing Kris backward. The other man kneed Kris in the stomach, sending him to the

ground, and then Kris picked up a rock and hit his combatant in the head. Now both of them were on the ground, writhing and yelling.

Michael and T-Bone hurried over. "Nigger, not around here!" T-Bone said, laughing at the fairly pathetic display of fighting. "I told you about keeping this shit peaceful."

"It will be peaceful as long as he pays up," Kris said.

"Pays up?" the other man said. "He can finish, then I'll pay. Twenty bucks to fix my radiator? Fuck that! He got to do more than that for twenty."

"Nigger, I already washed the damn car," Kris said. He stood up, wincing. "You took this shit too far. I'm not doing nothing else for twenty bucks." Kris picked up a wrench and hit the man in the leg. The man groaned in pain, his face swollen with anger, and it looked as if he was going to go after Kris.

T-Bone grabbed Kris, even though he could barely keep himself from laughing. "Damn! What did I tell you? Lay that shit down. Now come over here."

T-Bone walked the two men over to the edge of the parking lot. They were both limping. Soon after, Kris started washing T-Bone's car while the other man sat on the ground, nursing his leg.

"I'll teach that nigger!" Kris said to himself loudly. "No one messes with me."

T-Bone walked over to Michael and me. "Nigger was right," he said, pointing to Kris. "He washed the man's car and fixed the radiator. And that costs twenty dollars. He don't need to do nothing else. I got the money for you. And five bucks extra for the hassle."

T-Bone handed Michael the money, slapped my face gently, winked, and hummed a song as he walked off. Michael didn't say anything.

That night, once it was too dark to work on cars, I sat with Michael and Kris by their beat-up white Subaru, and we drank some

beers. Michael told me that T-Bone often settled customer disputes for them.

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"Because we pay him to!" Michael said. "I mean, we don't have a choice."

Michael explained that he and Kris paid T-Bone 15 percent of their weekly revenue. Just as J.T.'s foot soldiers squeezed a little money from squatters and prostitutes, his higher-ranked officers supplemented their income with more substantial taxes. In return, the gang brought Kris and Michael customers and mediated any disputes. This occasionally included beating up a customer who became recalcitrant or abusive. "That happens once a month," Kris said with satisfaction. "Best way to teach people not to fuck with us."

I asked Michael and Kris whether beating one customer might in fact deter other customers. The reply taught me a lot about the Black Kings.

"When *you* got a problem, I bet you call the police, right?" Michael said. "Well, we call the Kings. I call T-Bone because I don't have anyone else to call."

"But you *could* call the police," I said. "I don't understand why you can't call them if something goes wrong."

"If I'm out here hustling, or if you're in the building hustling, there's no police officer who's going to do what T-Bone does for us," Michael said. "Every hustler tries to have someone who offers them protection. I don't care if you're selling socks or selling your ass. You need someone to back you up."

"See, we were both Black Kings when we were younger," Kris said. "Most of the people you see, the older ones who live right here? They were Kings at one time. So it's complicated. I mean, if you own a business on Forty-seventh Street, you pay taxes and you get protection—from the police, from the aldermen—"

I interrupted Kris to ask why they'd need protection from the *aldermen*. He looked at me as if I was naïve—which I was—and explained that the aldermen's line workers, or "precinct captains," liked to tax any off-the-books entrepreneurial activity. "So instead we pay the gang, and the gang protects us."

"But it's more than that," Michael said. "I mean, you're stuck. These niggers make your life hell, but they're family. And you can't choose your family!" He started to laugh so hard that he nearly spilled his beer.

"Just imagine," Kris prodded me. "Let's say another gang came by and started shooting. Or let's say you got a bunch of niggers that get into the building and go and rob a bunch of people. Who's going to take care of that? Police? They never come around! So you got J.T. and the Kings. They'll get your stuff back if it was stolen. They'll protect you so that no niggers can come and shoot up the place."

Kris and Michael really seemed to believe, although with some reservations, that the gang was their extended family. Skeptical as I may have been, the gang plainly *was* looked upon as something other than a purely destructive force. I remembered what J.T. had told me a while back, a pronouncement that hadn't made much sense at the time: "The gang and the building," he had said, "are the same."

One hot afternoon, while hanging out in the lobby of J.T.'s building with some tenants and a few BKs, I saw another side of the relationship between the gang and the community. Outside the building a car was blasting rap music. A basketball game had just finished, and to combat the heat a few dozen people were drinking beer and enjoying the breeze off the lake.

I heard a woman shouting, maybe fifty yards away, in a small grove of oak trees. It was one of the few shady areas on the prem-

ises. The trees predated Robert Taylor and would likely be standing long after the projects were gone. The music was too loud for me to make out what the woman was saying, and so I—along with quite a few other people—hurried over.

Several men were physically restraining the woman, who looked to be in her forties. "Let go of me!" she screamed. "I'm going to kick his ass! Just let me at him. Let go!"

"No, baby," one of the men said, trying to calm her down. "You can't do it that way, you can't take care of it like that. Let us handle it."

"Hey, Price!" another man shouted. "Price, come over here."

Price had been a Black Kings member for many years and had a wide range of expertise. At present he was in charge of the gang's security, which matched up well with his love of fighting. He was tall and lanky, and he took his job very seriously. He strode over now to the screaming woman, trailed by a few Black Kings foot soldiers. I waved at Price, and he didn't seem to mind that I had put myself close to the action.

"What's going on?" he asked the men. "Why is Boo-Boo screaming like that?"

"She said the Ay-rab at the store fucked her baby," one man told him. "He gave her baby some disease."

Price spoke softly to her, trying to calm her down. I asked a young woman next to me what was going on. She said that Boo-Boo thought the proprietor of a nearby corner store had slept with her teenage daughter and given her a sexually transmitted disease. There were several such stores in the neighborhood, all of them run by Arab Americans. "She wants to beat the shit out of that Ay-rab," the woman told me. "She was just on her way over to the store to see that man."

By now about a hundred people had gathered around. We all

watched Price talking to Boo-Boo while one of the men locked Boo-Boo's arms behind her back. Suddenly he let her go, and Boo-Boo marched off toward the store, with Price beside her and a pack of tenants following behind. "Kick his ass, Boo-Boo!" someone hollered. There were other riled shouts: "Don't let them Ay-rabs do this to us!" and "Price, kill that boy!"

We arrived at a small, decrepit store known as Crustie's. The name wasn't posted anywhere, but the usual signs were: CIGARETTES SOLD HERE and FOOD STAMPS WELCOME and PLEASE DO NOT LOITER. By the time I arrived, Boo-Boo was already inside yelling, but it was hard to hear what she was saying. I moved closer to the entrance. Now I could see Boo-Boo taking boxes and cans of food off the shelves and throwing them, but I couldn't see her target. Price leaned against the refrigerator case, wearing a serious look. Then Boo-Boo reached for a big glass bottle, and Price grabbed her before she could throw it.

A few minutes later, a man ran outside. He looked to be Middle Eastern; he waved his arms and shouted in what I assumed was Arabic. He was in his early forties, clean-cut, with a short-sleeved, collared shirt. He broke through the crowd, pushing people aside. Some pushed back, but he managed to unlock his car and get inside.

But Boo-Boo followed him. She started throwing liquor bottles at the car. One burst on the hood, another missed entirely. The crowd started hooting, and some of the men grabbed her. We all watched as the car sped off, with Boo-Boo falling down in the middle of the street, still screaming, "You raped my baby girl! You raped her, you Ay-rab!"

Price walked slowly out of the store, accompanied by an older man I recognized as the store's manager. He also looked Middle Eastern and wore a striped dress shirt and khakis. He had a weary look about him, as if running a store in this neighborhood had taken

a grave toll. He was talking quietly while Price stared straight ahead, nodding once in a while; the manager appeared to be pleading his case. Finally they shook hands, and Price moved aside, his foot soldiers trailing him.

Then the manager started to carry out cases of soda and beer, leaving them on the sidewalk. The crowd pounced. Most people grabbed just a few cans or bottles, but some were tough enough to wrest away a six-pack or two. The manager hauled out more and more cases, and these disappeared just as fast. He set them down with little emotion, although occasionally he'd glance at the crowd, as if he were feeding birds in a park, and wipe the sweat off his brow. When our eyes met, he just shook his head, shrugged, and walked back inside.

Price watched from a distance. I saw him speaking with Ms. Bailey, a woman in her late fifties who was the tenant president of the building where J.T. lived. I had met Ms. Bailey a few times already. She smiled now as I approached, then grabbed my hand and pulled me into a hug. She turned back to Price.

"We can't have people treat women like that, baby," she said to him. "You-all know that."

"I know, Ms. Bailey," Price said, exasperated. "Like I said, I'm taking care of it. But if *you* want to do it, go ahead!"

"I'll deal with it in my own way, but for now I want you to talk with him tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, Ms. Bailey, we're on it," Price said matter-of-factly. "J.T. or I will take care of it."

Ms. Bailey started yelling at a few women who stood arguing with the store manager. "Everyone get your pop and get out of here," she said. "And you-all leave this man alone. He ain't the one you're looking for." She walked the manager inside and again told everyone to go home.

I caught up with Price and asked him to explain what had happened.

"That Ay-rab slept with Coco," he said with a smirk. "But he didn't give her no disease. That little girl got that herself—she's a whore. Sixteen and she's been around already."

"So what was all that about, then?" I asked. "Why the screaming, and what's up with the beer and soda?"

"Like I said, the man was sleeping with Coco, but he was giving her diapers and shit for Coco's baby." I had heard rumors that some store owners gave women free food and household items in exchange for sex. Some residents were very upset at the practice. In fact, I heard Ms. Mae regularly plead with J.T. to put a stop to this behavior. J.T.'s answer to his mother was nearly identical to what Price now told me: "You can't stop that shit. It's been happening like that for the longest time. It's just how people do things around here."

I asked Price what his role had been today. "I told Boo-Boo that I would go over to the store with her and let her yell at that man," he said. "She said she was going to cut off his dick, take a picture of it, and put it up everywhere. He freaked out. That's why he ran. Then I told his brother, the one who owns the store, that he had to do something, 'cause people would burn the store down if he didn't. He said he'd put all the soda and beer he had on the sidewalk if people would leave the store alone. I told him, 'Cool.' But I told him that I needed to speak with him tomorrow, because I don't want Boo-Boo killing his little brother, which she *will* do. So tomorrow we'll figure all this shit out so no one gets hurt."

I was just about to ask Price why he was responsible for mediating a dispute like this. But he preempted me. "That's what BKs are about," he said. "We just help keep the peace. We take care of our community."

This explanation didn't satisfy me, and I wanted to talk to J.T.

about it. But he was so busy these days that I barely saw him—and when I did, he was usually with other gang leaders, working on the political initiatives that the BKs were putting together.

And then, just before Labor Day, J.T.'s efforts to impress his superiors started to bear fruit. He told me that he was heading south for a few days. The highest-ranking BK leaders met downstate every few months, and J.T. had been invited to his first big meeting.

The Black Kings were a large regional gang, with factions as far north as Milwaukee, southward to St. Louis, east to Cleveland, and west to Iowa. I was surprised when J.T. first mentioned that the gang operated in Iowa. He told me that most Chicago gangs tried to recruit local dealers there, usually by hanging out at a high-school basketball or football game. But Iowa wasn't very profitable. Chicago gang leaders got frustrated at how "country" their Iowa counterparts were, even in places like Des Moines. They were undisciplined, they gave away too much product for free, they drank too much, and sometimes they plain forgot to go to work. But the Iowa market was large enough that most Chicago gangs, including the Black Kings, kept trying.

J.T. had made clear to me his ambition to move up in the gang's hierarchy, and this regional meeting was clearly a step in that direction.

In his absence, he told me, I could hang out as much as I wanted around his building. He said he'd let his foot soldiers know they should be expecting me, and he left me with his usual caution: "Don't walk too far from the building. I won't be able to help you."

After J.T. told me about his plans, I was both excited and nervous. I had hung around Robert Taylor without him, but usually only for a few hours at a stretch. Now I would have more time to walk around, and I hoped to meet more people who could tell me about the gang from their perspective. I knew I had to be careful with the

line of questioning, but at last I'd been granted an opportunity to get out from under J.T.'s thumb and gain a wider view of the Black Kings.

I immediately ran into a problem. Because I'd been spending so much time with the Black Kings, a lot of the tenants wouldn't speak to me except for a quick hello or a bland comment about the weather. They plainly saw me as affiliated with the BKs, and just as plainly they didn't want to get involved with me.

Ms. Bailey, the building president, was one of the few tenants willing to talk. Her small, two-room office was located in J.T.'s building, where she lived as well. This was in the northern end of the Robert Taylor Homes, sometimes called "Robert Taylor A." A few miles away, at the southern end of the complex, was "Taylor B," where a different group of gangs and tenant leaders held the power. On most dimensions daily life was the same in Taylor A and Taylor B: they had similar rates of poverty and drug abuse, for instance, and similar levels of gang activity and crime.

But there was at least one big difference, Ms. Bailey told me, which was that Taylor B had a large Boys & Girls Club where hundreds of young people could shoot pool, play basketball, use the library, and participate in youth programs. Ms. Bailey was jealous that Taylor A had no such facility. Even though Taylor B was walking distance from Taylor A, gang boundaries made it hard to move freely even if you had nothing to do with a gang. It was usually teenagers who got hassled when they crossed over, but even adults could have trouble. They might get searched by a gang sentry when they tried to enter a high-rise that wasn't their own; they might also get robbed.

The best Ms. Bailey could offer the children in Taylor A were three run-down apartments that had been converted into playrooms.

These spaces were pathetic: water dripped from the ceilings, rats and roaches ran free, the bathrooms were rancid; all these playrooms had were a few well-worn board games, some stubby crayons, and an old TV set. Even so, whenever I visited, I saw that the children played with as much enthusiasm as if they were at Disney World.

One afternoon Ms. Bailey suggested that I visit the Boys & Girls Club in Taylor B. "Maybe with your connections you could help us raise money for a club like that in our area," she said.

I told her I'd be happy to help if I could. That Ms. Bailey saw me, a middle-class graduate student, as having "connections" said a lot about how alienated her community was from the powerful people in philanthropy and government who could actually make a difference.

Since Taylor B was controlled by the Disciples, a rival to J.T.'s Black Kings, Ms. Bailey personally walked me over to the Boys & Girls Club and introduced me to Autry Harrison, one of the club's directors.

Autry was about thirty years old, six foot two, and thin as a rail. He wore large, round glasses too big for his face and greeted me with a big smile and a handshake. "You got any skills, young man?" he asked brightly.

"I can read and write, but that's about it," I said.

Autry led me into the poolroom and yelled at a dozen little kids to come over. "This young man is going to read a book to you," he said, "and then I'd like you to talk about it with him." He whispered to me, "Many of their parents just can't read."

From that day forward, Autry was happy to have me at the club. I quickly got to know him well. He had grown up in Robert Taylor, served in the army, and, like a few caring souls of his generation, returned to his neighborhood to work with young people. Recently he'd gone back to school to study criminal justice at Chicago State

University and was working part-time there as a research assistant to a professor who was studying gangs. Autry was married, with a three-year-old daughter. Because of his obligations at the club and at home, he told me, he sometimes had to drop classes and even take a leave of absence from school.

In his youth Autry had made his fair share of bad choices: he'd been a pimp and a gang member, for instance, and he had engaged in criminal activity. He'd also suffered the effects of project living—he'd been beaten up, had his money stolen, watched friends get shot and die in a gang war.

Autry sometimes sat for hours, leaning back in a chair with his skinny arms propped behind his head, telling me the lessons he'd learned from his days as a pimp. These included "Never sleep with your ladies," "Always let them borrow money, because you got the power when they owe you shit," and "If you *do* sleep with them, always, always, always wear a condom, even when you're shaking their hand, because you just never know where they've been."

We got along well, and Autry became a great source of information for me on how project residents viewed the gang. The club, it turned out, wasn't a refuge only for children. Senior citizens played cards there, religious folks gathered for fellowship, and social workers and doctors provided free counseling and medical care. Just like many of the hustlers I'd been speaking to, Autry felt that the gang did help the community—giving away food, mediating conflicts, et cetera—but he also stressed that the community spent a lot of time "mopping up the gang's mistakes."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They kill, sometimes for the most stupid reasons," he said. "'You spoke to my girlfriend. . . .' 'You walked down the sidewalk in my territory. . . .' 'You looked at me funny— That's it, I'll kill you!'"

"So it's not always fights about drugs?"

"Are you kidding me?" He laughed. "See, the gang always says it's a business, and it is. But a fifteen-year-old around here is just like any fifteen-year-old. They want to be noticed. They don't get any attention at home, so they rebel. And at the club we're always mopping up their mistakes."

"How does that work?"

"Well, we settle shit when it gets out of hand. Like the other day—Barry knifed somebody from a different gang because the other boy was hanging out near his building. Just for hanging out! So I called my friend Officer Reggie, and we let the two fight it out."

"Fight it out? I thought you said you *settled* it."

"We did. That's how you settle shit sometimes. Let boys fight each other—no guns, no knives. Then you tell them, 'Okay, you-all see that you can fight without killing each other?' "

Autry told me that the club played a broad peacekeeping role in the community. He and other staff members worked with school authorities, social workers, and police officers to informally mediate all kinds of problems, rather than ushering young men and women into the criminal-justice system. The police regularly brought shoplifters, vandals, and car thieves to the club, where Autry and the others would negotiate the return of stolen property as well as, perhaps, some kind of restitution.

I never saw any of these mediations in person. Autry just told me about them after the fact. It didn't seem as if he were lying, but perhaps bragging a little. He told me that he even invited rival gang leaders to the club late at night to resolve their conflicts. My conversations with Autry were a bit like some of my conversations with J.T.: it was not always easy to independently verify their claims.

One busy morning Autry surprised me by asking if I wanted to come to a private meeting at the club later that day. He explained

that a few neighborhood organizations were planning a midnight basketball league.

It would be open to all teenagers, but the real goal was to attract gang members. Local community leaders liked the idea of getting unruly teens to play basketball at the club instead of spending their nights on the street. For the young men, the price of admission was to sit through a motivational speech by a pastor or some other speaker before each game. In exchange, the teenagers would get free sneakers, T-shirts, and the chance to win a trophy.

Autry's work would soon command wide attention, when the Clinton administration used the Chicago midnight basketball league as a model for a nationwide movement. In reality there was only anecdotal evidence that the leagues reduced teenage violence, but in a climate where few programs were successful on any level, policy makers were eager to showcase an uplifting idea like midnight basketball.

When I showed up at the club that afternoon, Autry was sitting at a table bearing coffee and doughnuts, a handmade sign behind him on the wall: MIDNIGHT BASKETBALL MEETING IN CONFERENCE ROOM.

"Welcome, Sudhir," Autry said, beaming. "Everyone is inside." He mentioned the names of several tenant leaders, pastors, a Nation of Islam official, an ex-police officer. The basketball league was turning into a big deal for Autry. It represented his entrée into the elite group of community leaders, whom Autry very much wanted to join.

"You sure they won't mind if I sit in?" I asked.

"Not at all," Autry said, shuffling some papers. "And the niggers won't mind either."

"Who?" I asked.

"Man, we got them all!" He rubbed his hands together excitedly.

"We got *all* the leaders—Disciples, Black Kings, MCs, Stones. Everyone is coming!"

"You didn't tell me they'd be there," I said meekly.

Autry could tell I was concerned. "Don't worry. Just sit in the back and keep your mouth shut. I'll say you're with me. But help me with these first." He handed me three sets of flyers that needed to be passed out to everyone. One of them was titled "Rules for Buy-In," which specified the mandatory donation of each sponsoring "organization." Each gang was expected to contribute five thousand dollars and field four teams of ten players. The money would be used to pay for the referees, uniforms, and the cost of keeping the gym open at night.

"You're getting the gangs to pay for this?" I asked. "That doesn't bother you?"

"What would you rather that they do with their money?"

"Good point," I said. "But something doesn't feel right about it."

"I see." Autry put down the flyers and pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Two thousand niggers in this project making money by selling that poison, killing each other, killing everyone who buys it. We can't do *nothing* about it. And now we tell them that if they want to be selling that shit, they have to give back. They have to step up. And you look at *us* funny? It's them you should be asking these questions to."

"I would if I knew them," I said.

"Don't lie to me, nigger."

Autry knew I was on good terms with J.T., although I'd been cagey about the extent of our relationship. Many times he'd told me I needed to have the courage to ask J.T. more difficult questions about the gang, even if it would upset him. "At least you can ask *one* of these niggers the question," he said. "And he'll be here tonight." Autry let out a loud laugh and went outside to smoke his cigarette.

Shit. It would be the first time I'd seen J.T. in several weeks. I was usually careful to ask his permission before attending any event involving gangs, both to show respect and because I needed a patron. Otherwise, as he always told me, my personal safety couldn't be guaranteed.

I decided to wait outside the club to talk to J.T. when he arrived. Autry offered to wait with me. We stood on the sidewalk and watched the busy, noisy traffic along Federal Street. The club sat in the shadow of a project high-rise. You could hear people yelling from the sidewalk up to the open windows—there was no intercom system—and you could smell the smoke of marijuana and menthol cigarettes.

Before long, J.T. and the leaders of the other gangs began pulling up with their respective security entourages. The scene was straight out of a gangsta-rap video. Each vehicle—there were sports cars, fancy trucks, and one long, purple Lincoln Continental—was immaculate, rims sparkling from a fresh wash. They drove up in a line, as if in a funeral procession, parking across the street from the club. The first man out of each car was a bodyguard, even if the gang leader was the one who drove.

Autry crossed the street, as nonchalantly as his excitement allowed, to ensure them that the club was safe, neutral territory. They were all dressed similarly: new tracksuits, white sneakers, and plenty of gold on their wrists and around their necks. As they approached, each leader was trailed by one or two bodyguards, with another one or two staying behind with the cars. All the bodyguards wore sunglasses and baseball caps.

J.T. noticed me standing there and pushed his bodyguards aside. "You-all go in!" he shouted to the other gang leaders, "I'll see you in a bit." Then he turned to me. He shrugged his shoulders and glared, the universal signal for "What the fuck?"

Autry intervened before I could answer. "Hey, man," he said, "no worries, he's with me."

"He's with *you*?!" J.T. wasn't smiling. "You *know* him?"

"Yeah, big boss man, today he's with me." Autry smiled, his front teeth glistening as he leaned over and hugged J.T.

"Oh, so he's with you now," J.T. repeated, shaking his head. He pulled out a cigarette, and Autry lit it for him.

"Sorry," I said, "I haven't seen you in a while. Autry and I just met, and he said I could come to this meeting. I should've told you."

"Yeah, the brother didn't mean nothing," Autry said. "Not a big deal. No taping today, right, my brother?" Autry loved to walk into a room with me at the club and yell, "Sudhir is from the university, and he'll be taping everything you say today!"

"Not a big deal?" J.T. said, turning to Autry. "You're more ignorant than I thought you were. You pulled all these people together, and you're going to fuck it up like this."

"Whoa, my brother. Like I said, he's with me."

"And what if he comes by *my* building? Is he with you then? Huh? Is he with you then, nigger?"

"Fuck, no!" Autry laughed. "Then he's with *you*! 'Cause I ain't stepping *foot* in that motherfucker. Hell no!"

Autry ducked inside, grinning broadly. He seemed to be having great fun.

"That's what I thought," J.T. said, turning to me. "If you walk in there, the first time all these other niggers see you, then you're with Autry, not me. You didn't think about that, did you? You're a motherfucking impatient nigger. And an ignorant one, from where I stand. You walk in there and I can't do nothing for you. No more. So it's up to you."

"I didn't think about any of this," I apologized. "I didn't know how—"

"Yeah, nigger, you didn't *think*." J.T. started walking inside. "Like I said, you're with me or you're with someone else. You decide."

Inside, I could see Autry, giggling at me. "Come in, boy!" he yelled. "Come in, little baby! You scared?"

I decided I wasn't willing to jeopardize my relationship with J.T., even if it meant missing an opportunity to learn more about the community and the gangs. So I turned and walked away. I started toward the university, and then I stopped. The last time I'd had an uncomfortable episode with J.T.—his beat-down of C-Note—I'd made a mistake. I'd waited too long before speaking to him about it. That made it harder to get a satisfying explanation. So this time I headed straight for J.T.'s building, figuring he'd go there when the meeting was over.

He did. He still seemed upset and started yelling at his mother. "No one understands what I deal with!" he said. "No one listens and does what I say." He sent his bodyguards out to buy some beer. He sat on the recliner and grabbed the remote control. He barely glanced at me.

"You pissed at me?" I asked.

"What the fuck have you been doing around here?" he asked.

I explained that Ms. Bailey had introduced me to Autry and that I was interested in what went on at the club. He seemed surprised that he no longer knew all the specifics about the people I was meeting. "I guess you were going to make some friends while I was gone," he said, and then he asked a question I'd been hoping he'd never ask: "What exactly are you doing around here? I mean, what are you writing about?"

He started changing channels on the TV. It was the first time I'd ever been with him when he didn't look me in the eye.

"Well, honestly, I'm . . . I'm fascinated by how you do what you do," I stammered. "Like I said before, I'm trying to understand how

your mind works, why you decided to come back to the neighborhood and run this organization, what you have to do to make it. But if I don't get out and see how others look at you, how you have this incredible effect on other people, then I'll never really understand what you do. So while you were gone, I thought I'd branch out."

"You mean you're asking people what they think about *me*?" Now he had turned to look at me again.

"Well, not really, because you know they would probably not feel comfortable telling me. I'm at stage one. I'm trying to understand what the organization does and how people have to deal with it. If you piss people off, how do they respond? Do they call the police? Do they call you?"

"Okay. So it's how others work *with me*."

He seemed appeased, so I was quick to affirm. "Yes! How others work with you. That's a great way of putting it." I hoped he wouldn't ask what "stage two" was, for I had no idea. I felt a little uneasy letting him think that I was actually writing his biography, but at the moment I just wanted to buy myself some time.

He checked his watch. "All right, I need to get some sleep." He got up and walked toward his bedroom without saying good-bye. In the kitchen Ms. Mae kissed me good night, and I walked to the bus stop.

J.T. was a little cool toward me the next few times I saw him. So to warm things up, I stopped going to the club and spent nearly all my time in and around J.T.'s building. I was unhappy to be missing the opportunity to see how Autry worked with other people behind the scenes on important community issues, but I didn't want to further anger J.T. I just told Autry that I'd be busy for

a few weeks but I'd be back once I got settled in with my course work in the coming fall semester.

Soon after the school year began, a young boy and girl in Robert Taylor were shot, accidental victims of a drive-by gang shooting. The boy was eight, the girl nine. They both spent time in the hospital, and then the girl died. The shooting occurred at the border of Taylor A and Taylor B. J.T.'s gang had been on the receiving end of the shooting, with several members injured. The shooters were from the Disciples, who operated out of the projects near the Boys & Girls Club.

This single shooting had a widespread effect. Worried that a full-scale gang war would break out, parents began keeping their children inside, which meant taking time off from work or otherwise adjusting their schedules. Senior citizens worried about finding a safe way to get medical treatment. Local churches mobilized to deliver food to families too scared to walk to the store.

Ms. Bailey told me about a meeting at the Boys & Girls Club where the police would address concerned parents and tenant leaders. If I really wanted to see how the gang's actions affected the broader community, Ms. Bailey said, I should be there.

I asked J.T., and he thought it was a good idea, even though he never bothered with such things. "The police don't do nothing for us," he said. "You should understand that by now." Then he muttered something about how the community "takes care of its problems," mentioning the incident I'd seen with Boo-Boo, Price, and the Middle Eastern store manager.

The meeting was held late one weekday morning. The streets outside the club were quiet, populated by a smattering of unemployed people, gang members, and drug addicts. The leaves had already changed, but the day was unseasonably warm.

Autry was busy as usual, running to and fro making sure everything was ready. Although I hadn't seen him in some time, he shot me a friendly glance. The meeting was held in a large, windowless concrete room with a linoleum floor. There were perhaps forty tenants in attendance—all fanning themselves, since the heat was turned up too high. "If we turn it off, we can't get it back on right away," Autry told me. "And then it's May by the time you get it back on."

At the front of the room, several uniformed police officers and police officials sat behind a long table. Ms. Bailey nodded me toward a seat beside her, up front and off to one side.

The meeting was an exercise in chaos. Residents shouted past one another while the police officials begged for calm. A mother holding her infant yelled that she was "sick and tired of living like this." The younger and middle-aged parents were the most vocal. The senior citizens sat quietly, many of them with Bibles in their hands, looking as if they were ready for church. Nor did the police have much to say, other than platitudes about their continued efforts to disrupt the gangs and requests for tenants to start cooperating with them by reporting gang crimes.

After about forty-five minutes, the police looked very ready to leave. So did the tenants. As the meeting broke up, some of them waved their hands dismissively at the cops.

"Are these meetings always so crazy?" I asked Ms. Bailey.

"This is how it goes," she said. "We yell at them, they say nothing. Everyone goes back to doing what they were doing."

"I don't see what you get out of this. It seems like a waste of time."

Ms. Bailey just patted my knee and said, "Mm-hmm."

"I mean it," I said. "This is ridiculous. Where I grew up, you'd have an army of cops all over the place. But nothing is going on here. Doesn't that upset you?"

By now the room had cleared out except for Ms. Bailey and a few other tenant leaders, Autry, and one policeman, Officer Johnson, a tall black man who worked out of a nearby precinct. He was well groomed, with a short mustache and graying hair. They were all checking their watches and speaking quietly to one another.

I was about to leave when Ms. Bailey walked over. "In two hours come back here," she said. "But now you have to go."

Autry smiled and winked as he passed. What was he up to? I knew that Autry was still trying to groom himself as a local power broker, but I didn't know how much power, if any, he had actually accrued.

As instructed, I left for a while and took a walk around the neighborhood. When I returned to the club, Autry silently pointed me toward the room where the earlier meeting had been held. Inside, I saw Ms. Bailey and some other building presidents; Officer Johnson and Autry's friend Officer Reggie, a well-liked cop who had grown up in Robert Taylor; and Pastor Wilkins, who was said to be a longstanding expert in forging gang truces. Autry, I knew, saw himself as Pastor Wilkins's eventual successor.

They were all milling about, shaking hands and chatting softly before settling into the folding metal chairs Autry had arranged. A few of them looked at me with a bit of surprise as I sat down, but no one said anything.

And then, to *my* great surprise, I saw J.T., sitting with a few of his senior officers along one wall. Although our eyes didn't meet, I could tell that he noticed me.

Even more surprising was the group on the other side of the room: a gang leader named Mayne, who ran the Disciples, accompanied by *his* officers, leaning quietly against the wall.

I took a good look at Mayne. He was a heavyset man with a crumpled face, like a bulldog's. He appeared bored and irritated, and

he kept issuing instructions to his men: "Nigger, get me a cigarette." "Boy, get me a chair."

Autry walked into the room. "Okay!" he shouted. "The club is closed, let's get going. Kids are going to come back at five."

Officer Reggie stood up. "Let's get moving," he said. "Ms. Bailey, you wanted to start. Go ahead." He walked toward the back of the room.

"First, J.T., get the other men out of the room," she said. "You, too, Mayne."

Mayne and J.T. both motioned for their senior officers to leave, and they did, walking out slowly with stoic faces. Ms. Bailey stood silently until they were gone. Then she took a deep breath. "Pastor, you said you had an idea, something you wanted to ask these young men?"

"Yes, Ms. Bailey," Pastor Wilkins said. He stood up. "Now, I know how this began. Shorties probably fighting over some girl, right? And it got all the way to shooting each other. That's crazy! I mean, I can understand if you were fighting over business, but you're killing people around here because of a spat in school!"

"We're defending our honor," Mayne said. "Ain't nothing more important than that."

"Yeah," said J.T. "And it *is* about business. Those guys come shooting down on our end, scaring people away."

Pastor Wilkins asked Mayne and J.T. to describe how the fight had escalated. Pastor Wilkins's original guess was mostly right: two teenage boys at DuSable High School got into a fight over a girl. One boy was in J.T.'s gang, the other in Mayne's. Over the course of a few weeks, the conflict escalated from unarmed to armed—first a knife fight and then the drive-by shooting. The shooting occurred during the afternoon, while kids were playing outside after school.

J.T. said that because his customers had been scared off since the shooting, and because tenants in his buildings were angry about their lives being interrupted, he wanted Mayne to pay a penalty.

Mayne argued that the shooting took place at the border of the two gangs' territory, near a park that neither gang claimed. Therefore, he argued, J.T. was ineligible for compensation.

My mind raced as they spoke. I couldn't believe that a religious leader and a police officer were not only watching this mediation but were actually *facilitating* it. What incentive did they have to do so—and what would happen if people from the community found out they were helping gang leaders settle their disputes? I was also struck by how levelheaded everyone seemed, even J.T. and Mayne, as if they'd been through this before. These were the same two gang leaders, after all, who had been trying to kill each other, quite literally, with drive-by shootings. I wondered if one of them might even pull a gun here at any moment. Perhaps the very strangest thing was how sanguine the community leaders were about the fact that these men sold crack cocaine for a living. But at this moment it seemed that pragmatism was more important than moralism.

After a while the conversation got bogged down, with J.T. and Mayne merely restating their positions. Autry jumped in to try to refocus things. "How much you think you lost?" he asked J.T. "I mean, you don't need to tell me the amount, but how many days did you lose business?"

"Probably a few days, maybe a week," J.T. said.

"Okay, well, we're going to bank this," Autry said. "Put it in the bank."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Mayne asked.

"Nigger, that means you messed up," Autry told him. "J.T. didn't retaliate, did he? I mean, he didn't shoot over at you. It was just you

shooting down at his end, right? So J.T. gets to sell his shit in the park for a week. The next time this happens, and J.T. fucks up, you get to sell *your* shit in the park for a week."

Ms. Bailey spoke up. "You-all do not get to sell nothing when the kids are there, okay? Just late at night."

"Sounds fine to me," J.T. said. Mayne nodded in agreement.

"Then we have a truce," Pastor Wilkins said. He walked over to J.T. and Mayne. "Shake on it."

J.T. and Mayne shook hands, not warmly and not willing to look at each other. The pastor and Ms. Bailey each let out a sigh.

As J.T., Mayne, and Pastor Wilkins sat down to work out the details of the deal, I walked out front. There was Autry, smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. He shook his head; he looked fatigued.

"This stuff is hard, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I try to block out the fact that they could get pissed at me and kill me if I say something they don't like. You never know if they'll go home and think you're working for the other side."

"You ever get hurt before?"

"I got my ass kicked a few times—one time real bad—'cause they thought I wasn't being fair. I'm not sure I want to have that happen again."

"You don't get paid enough," I said.

J.T. came out of the club and stopped beside me. His head was lowered. Autry moved away.

"You wanted this, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "this is what I'm looking for." He knew I'd been eager to see how the community and the gang worked out their differences. But he'd also made it clear that I could do so only if I had a patron, and I had to choose between J.T. and Autry. I chose J.T.

"Just remember, *you* wanted this," he said. "I didn't make you come here today. I didn't tell you about this. *You* wanted this." He

pressed his finger into my chest every time he said "you." I sensed that despite our last conversation J.T. felt I was slipping from his grasp.

"I know," I said. "Don't worry."

"*I'm* not worried." He let out a sinister laugh. "But you should really think about this. Just remember, I didn't bring you here. I can't protect you. Not all the time anyway. You did this on your own."

"I get it, I'm on my own."

J.T. smiled, pressed his finger into my chest one last time, with force, and walked away.