FOUR

Gang Leader for a Day

After nearly three years of hanging out with J.T., I began talking to several of my professors about my dissertation topic. As it happened, they weren't as enthusiastic as I was about an in-depth study of the Black Kings crack gang and its compelling leader. They were more interested in the standard sociological issues in the community: entrenched poverty, domestic violence, the prevalence of guns, residents' charged relations with the government—and, to a lesser extent, how the community dealt with the gang.

If I explored these subjects well, my professors said, I could explain how the Robert Taylor tenants really behaved, rather than simply arguing that they didn't act like middle-class people.

Bill Wilson in particular was adamant that I adopt a wider lens on the gang and its role in Robert Taylor. Because sociology had such a strong tradition of "community studies," he wanted me to write the definitive report on everyday life in high-rise housing projects.

He also said he'd started worrying about my safety in the proj-

ects. By this point I had taken up golf as a way to spend more time with Wilson, an avid golfer. "I'm having nightmares, Sudhir," he said once in the middle of the fairway, staring out blankly. "You're worrying me, and I really want you to think about spending some time with others." He drifted off, never instructing me about which "others" I should be observing, but I knew this was code for *anyone* besides the gang.

I knew he had my best interests in mind, but it still came as a shock to me that I would have to widen my focus if I still planned to base my dissertation on this community. It meant that J.T. wouldn't be the sole target of my attention, and perhaps not even the primary target. A few of my professors were seasoned ethnographers, experts in the methodology of firsthand observation. They were insistent that I avoid getting so close to any one source that I would be beholden to him.

Easier said than done. I hadn't forgotten how agitated J.T. became when he saw me branching out into the community. I really didn't feel I could tell him that my project was moving away from a focus on his leadership. By now J.T. wasn't my only access to the community, but he was certainly my best access. He was the one who had brought me in, and he was the one who could open—or shut—any door. But beyond all that lay one simple fact: J.T. was a charismatic man who led a fascinating life that I wanted to keep learning about.

J.T. seemed to appreciate having the ear of an outsider who would listen for hours to his tales of bravado and managerial prowess. He often expressed how hard it was to oversee the gang, to keep the drug economy running smoothly, and to deal with the law-abiding tenants who saw him as an adversary. Sometimes he spoke of his job with dispassion, as if he were the CEO of

some widget manufacturer—an attitude that I found not only jarring but, given the violence and destruction his enterprise caused, irresponsible.

He fancied himself a philanthropist as much as a leader. He spoke proudly of quitting his mainstream sales job in downtown Chicago to return to the projects and use his drug profits "to help others." How did he help? He mandated that all his gang members get a high-school diploma and stay off drugs. He gave money to some local youth centers for sports equipment and computers. He willingly loaned out his gang members to Robert Taylor tenant leaders, who deployed them on such tasks as escorting the elderly on errands or beating up a domestic abuser. J.T. could even put a positive spin on the fact that he made money by selling drugs. A drug economy, he told me, was "useful for the community," since it redistributed the drug addicts' money back into the community via the gang's philanthropy.

I have to admit that J.T.'s rhetoric could be persuasive, even when I tried to play the skeptic. The fact was, I didn't yet have a good grip on how his gang really affected the broader community. On an even more basic level, I wondered if I really had a complete sense of what J.T. did on a daily level. What kind of gang activities *wasn't* he showing me?

One cold February morning, I stood with him on a street corner as he met with one of his drug-selling crews. I was shivering, still unaccustomed to the chilling lake winds, and trying hard to focus on what J.T. was saying. He spoke to his men about the need to take pride in their work. He was also trying to motivate the younger members to brave the cold and sell as much crack as they could. In weather like this, the youngest members had to stand outside and sell while the ones with more seniority hung out in a building lobby.

After addressing his troops, J.T. said he was going off to play bas-

ketball. He climbed into his Malibu and I climbed in with him. We were parked near a busy intersection at State Street, within view of a Robert Taylor high-rise, some low-rise stores, and the Boys & Girls Club. Before he even turned the key, I mentioned, half joking, that I thought he was seriously overpaid.

"I don't see what's so difficult about your job," I said. "I mean, you *say* how hard it is to do what you do, but I just can't see it being that difficult." All I ever saw him do, I said, was walk around and shake hands with people, spend money, drive nice cars—he owned at least three that I knew of—and party with his friends. J.T. just sat for a moment, making no move to drive off. "Okay, well, you want to give it a try? If you think it's so easy, you try it."

"I don't think that would be possible. I don't think graduate school is really training me to lead a gang."

"Yeah, but you don't think I need any skills at all to do this. So you should have no problem doing it, right?"

It was true that *sometimes* his job looked hard. When his gang was warring with another gang, for instance, J.T. had to coordinate his troops and motivate fifteen-year-old kids to stand out in the open and sell drugs despite the heightened risk of being shot, beaten up, or arrested. And it wasn't as though these kids were getting rich for their trouble. The BKs, like most other street gangs, had a small leadership class. J.T. kept only a few officers on his payroll: a treasurer, a couple of "enforcers," a security coordinator, and then a set of lesser-paid "directors" who managed the six-person teams that did the actual street-level selling of crack.

But for the most part, it seemed that J.T.'s gang members spent their time hanging around on street corners, selling drugs, shooting dice, playing sports, and talking about women. Did it really take a self-styled CEO to manage *that*?

I expressed this sentiment to J.T. "I could do it," I said. "Probably. I mean, I don't think I could handle a war and I've never shot a gun, so it depends what you mean when you say 'try it.' "

"Just that—try it. There's no war on right now, no fighting. So you don't even have to touch a gun. But I can't promise that you won't have to do something you may not like."

"Such as?"

"I'm not telling you. You said you think it's easy, so you do it, and you'll see what I mean."

"Is this an offer?"

"Nigger, this is the offer of a lifetime. Guaranteed that if you do this, you'll have a story for all your college friends."

He suggested that I try it for a day. This made me laugh: how could I possibly learn anything worthwhile in a single day?

From inside the car, I watched as parents gingerly stepped out of the high-rise lobby, kids in tow, trying to get to school and out of the unforgiving lake wind. A crossing guard motioned them to hurry up and cross the street, for there were a couple of eighteen-wheelers idling impatiently at a green light. As they passed his car, J.T. waved. Our breath was fogging up the windshield. He turned on the defroster, jacked the music a bit louder. "One day," he said. "Take it or leave it. That's all I'm saying. One day."

I met J.T. at seven-thirty the next morning at Kevin's Hamburger Heaven in Bridgeport, a predominantly Irish-American neighborhood across the expressway from the projects. This was his regular morning spot. "None of these white folks here know me," he said, "so I don't get any funny looks."

His steak and eggs arrived just as I sat down. He always ate alone, he said. Soon enough he'd be joined by two of his officers, Price and T-Bone. Even though J.T.'s gang was nearly twice as large as most

others on the South Side, he kept his officer class small, because he trusted very few people. All of his officers were friends he'd known since high school.

"All right," he began, "let's talk a little about—"

"Listen," I blurted out, "I can't kill anybody, I can't sell shit to anybody." I had been awake much of the night worrying. "Or even *plan* any of that stuff! Not me!"

"Okay, nigger, first of all you need to stop shouting." He looked about the room. "And stop worrying. But let me tell you what *I'm* worried about, chief."

He twirled a piece of steak on his fork as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

"I can't let you do *everything,* right, because I'll get into trouble, you dig? So there's just going to be some stuff you *can't* do. And you already told me some of the other stuff you don't *want* to be doing. But all that doesn't matter, because I got plenty of stuff to keep you busy for the day. And only the cats coming for breakfast know what you'll be doing. So don't be acting like you run the place in front of everybody. Don't embarrass me."

It was his own bosses, J.T. explained, that he was worried about, the Black Kings' board of directors. The board, roughly two dozen men who controlled all the neighborhood BK gangs in Chicago, kept a close eye on drug revenues, since their generous skim came off the top. They were always concerned that local leaders like J.T. keep their troops in line. Young gang members who made trouble drew unwanted police attention, which made it harder to sell drugs; the fewer drugs that were sold, the less money the board collected. So the board was constantly reminding J.T. to minimize the friction of his operation.

As J.T. was explaining all this, he repeated that only his senior officers knew that I was gang leader for a day. It wouldn't do, he said,

for the gang's rank and file to learn of our experiment, nor the community at large. I was excited at the thought of spending the day with J.T. I felt he might not be able to censor what I saw if I was with him for a full day. It was also an obvious sign that he trusted me. And I think he was flattered that I was interested in knowing what actually went into his work.

Impatient, I asked him what my first assignment was.

"You'll find out in a minute, as soon as I do. Eat up, you're going to need it."

I was nervous, to be sure, but not because I was implicating myself in an illegal enterprise. In fact, I hadn't even really thought about that angle. I probably should have. At most universities, faculty members solicit approval for their research from institutional review boards, which act as the main insurance against exploitative or unethical research. But the work of graduate students is largely overlooked. Only later, when I began sharing my experiences with my advisers and showing them my field notes, did I begin to understand—and adhere to—the reporting requirements for researchers who are privy to criminal conduct. But at the time, with little understanding of these protocols, I simply relied on my own moral compass.

This compass wasn't necessarily reliable. To be honest, I was a bit overwhelmed by the thrill of further entering J.T.'s world. I hoped he would someday introduce me to the powerful Black Kings leadership, the reputedly ruthless inner-city gang lords who had since transplanted themselves to the Chicago suburbs. I wondered if they were some kind of revolutionary vanguard, debating the theories of Karl Marx and W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah. (Probably not.) I also hoped that J.T. would bring me to some dark downtown tavern where large Italian men in large Italian suits met with black hustlers like J.T. to dream up a multiethnic, multigenera-

tional, multimillion-dollar criminal plan. My mind, it was safe to say, was racing out of control.

Price and T-Bone soon arrived and sat down at our table. By now I knew these two pretty well—T-Bone, the gang's bookish and chatty treasurer (which meant he handled most of the gang's fiscal and organizational issues), and Price, the thuggish and hard-living security chief (a job that included the allocation of particular street corners to particular BK dealers). They were the two men most responsible for helping J.T. with day-to-day affairs. They both nodded in my direction as they sat down, then looked toward J.T.

"Okay, T-Bone," J.T. said, "you're up, nigger. Talk to me. What's happening today?"

"Whoa, whoa!" I said. "I'm in charge here, no? I should call this meeting to order, no?"

"Okay, nigger," J.T. said, again glancing around. He still seemed concerned that I was talking too loud. "Just be cool."

I tried to calm down. "T-Bone, you're up. Talk to me, nigger."

J.T. collapsed on the table, laughing hard. T-Bone and Price laughed along with him.

"If he calls me 'nigger' again, I'm giving him an ass whupping," T-Bone said. "I don't *care* if he's my leader."

J.T. told T-Bone to go ahead and start listing the day's tasks.

"Ms. Bailey needs about a dozen guys to clean up the building today," T-Bone said. "Last night Josie and them partied all night long, and there's shit everywhere. We need to send guys to her by eleven or she *will* be pissed. And I do not want to be dealing with her when she's pissed. Not me."

"Okay, Sudhir," J.T. said, "what do we do?" He folded his arms and sat back, as if he'd just set up a checkmate.

"What? Are you kidding me? Is this a joke?"

"Ain't no joke," said T-Bone flatly. "What do I do?" He looked

at J.T., who pointed his finger at me. "C'mon, chief," T-Bone said to me. "I got about ten things I need to go over. Let's do this."

J.T. explained that he had to keep Ms. Bailey happy, since the gang sold crack in the lobby of her building and as building president she had the power to make things difficult. To appease her, J.T. regularly assigned his members to clean up her building and do other menial jobs. The young drug dealers hated these assignments not only because they were humiliating but because every hour of community service was one less hour earning money. Josie was a teenage member of J.T.'s gang who'd apparently thrown a party with some prostitutes and left the stairwells and gallery strewn with broken glass, trash, and used condoms.

"All right, who hasn't done cleanup in a while?" I asked.

"Well, you have Moochie's group and Kalia's group," T-Bone said. "Both of them ain't cleaned up for about three months." Moochie and Kalia were each in charge of a six-member sales force.

"Okay, how do we make a decision between the two?" I asked.

"Well, it depends on what you think is important," J.T. said. "Moochie's been making tall money, so you may not want to pull him off the streets. Kalia ain't been doing so hot lately, so maybe you want him to clean up, 'cause he isn't bringing in money anyway."

T-Bone countered by saying that maybe I should give the cleanup job to Moochie *because* he was making so much money lately. A little community service, T-Bone said, might ensure that "Moochie's head doesn't get too big." One of a leader's constant struggles was to keep younger members from feeling too powerful or independent.

Then Price threw in the fact that Moochie, who was in his early twenties, had been sleeping with Ms. Bailey, who was about fifty-five. This news shocked me: Was Moochie really attracted to a heavyset woman in her fifties? Price explained that younger guys often slept with older women, especially in winter, because otherwise they

might not have a warm, safe place to spend the night. Also, a leaseholding woman might let her younger boyfriend stash drugs and cash in her apartment and maybe even use it as a freelance sales spot.

"Maybe Ms. Bailey gets to liking Moochie and she tells everyone not to buy shit from anyone but his boys," Price said. "You can't have that, because Moochie feels like he owns the building, and he doesn't."

"What if I flip a coin?" I asked, frustrated that I was spending so much time delegating janitorial duties. "I mean, you can't win one way or the other."

"Giving up already?" J.T. asked.

"Okay, let's send Moochie over there," I said. "It's better that his head doesn't get too big. Short run, you lose a little money."

"You got it," T-Bone said, and stepped away to make a phone call.

Price brought up the next item. The BKs had been trying to find a large space—a church or school or youth center—where they could hold meetings. There were several occasions, J.T. explained, when the gang needed to gather all its members. If a member violated a major gang rule, J.T. liked to mete out punishment in front of the entire membership in order to encourage solidarity and, just as important, provide deterrence. If a member was caught stealing drugs, for instance, he might be brutally beaten in front of the whole gang.

J.T. might also call a large meeting to go over practical matters like sales strategies or suspicions about who might be snitching to the police. A big meeting also gave J.T. a captive audience for his oratory. I had already been to a few meetings in which the only content was a two-hour speech by J.T. on the virtues of loyalty and bravery.

He often called the gang together on a street corner or in a park.

But this was far from ideal. There were about 250 young men in J.T.'s gang; summoning even 50 of them to the same street corner was sure to bring out the police, especially if a beating was on the agenda.

I was curious about the gang's relationship with the police, but it was very hard to fathom. Gang members brazenly sold drugs in public; why, I wondered, didn't the cops just shut down these open-air markets? But I couldn't get any solid answers to this question. J.T. was always evasive on the issue, and most people in the neighborhood were scared to talk about the cops at all—even more scared, it seemed to me, than to talk about the gang. As someone who grew up in a suburb where the police were a welcome presence, I found this bizarre. But there was plainly a lot that I didn't yet understand.

The Black Kings also needed to meet en masse if they were preparing for war with another gang. Once in a while, a war began when teenage members of different gangs got into a fight that then escalated. But leaders like J.T. had a strong incentive to thwart this sort of conflict, since it jeopardized moneymaking for no good reason. More typically, a war broke out when one gang tried to take over a sales location that belonged to another gang. Or one gang might do a drive-by shooting in another gang's territory, hoping to scare off its customers—perhaps right into the territory of the gang that did the shooting.

When this kind of spark occurred, J.T. might pick up the phone and call his counterpart in the other gang to arrange a compromise. But, more often, gang leaders ordered a retaliation in order to save face. One drive-by shooting begat a retaliatory drive-by; if a Black Kings dealer got robbed of his drugs or cash by someone from another gang, then the Black Kings would do at least the same.

The retaliation was what signaled the start of a war. In J.T.'s gang it was the security officer, Price, who oversaw the details of the war:

posting sentries, hiring mercenary gunmen if need be, planning the drive-bys. Price enjoyed this work, and was often happiest during gang wars.

I had never seen a war last beyond a few weeks; the higher-ups in each gang understood that public violence was, at the very least, bad for business. Usually, after a week or ten days of fighting, the leaders would find a mediator, someone like Autry, to help forge a truce.

"Pastor Wilkins says we can meet once a week at the church, at night," Price said. "I spoke to him yesterday. He says he would like a donation."

Price started to chuckle. So did T-Bone, who had returned from his phone call, and J.T.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Pastor Wilkins is a faggot, man," J.T. said. "That nigger sucks dick all night long!"

I had no idea whether Pastor Wilkins really did have sex with men, but I didn't think it much mattered. Price and the others enjoyed making fun of him, and that was that.

"I still don't see what's so funny," I said.

"Nigger, *you* have to meet with him," T-Bone said. "Alone!"

"Oh, I get it. Very funny. Well, how about this? Since I'm leader, then that meeting is now scheduled for tomorrow. Ha!"

"No, the pastor wants to meet today," J.T. said, suddenly stern. "And I need to find out today if we have a place to meet on Friday. So you're up, brown man. Get ready."

"All right, then. I'm delegating T-Bone to visit Pastor Wilkins. Now, you can't tell me that I can't delegate!"

"Actually, I can," J.T. said. "It says in the gang's rules that only the leader can make these kinds of meetings."

"Now you guys are making shit up. But fine, I'll do it. I say we give him fifty bucks for the use of the church."

"What!" Price said. "Are you crazy?"

"Fifty will just make sure the cops arrive on time," T-Bone said. "You better think a little higher."

"Well, what did we pay last time?" I asked.

"It depends," J.T. said, explaining that it was not uncommon for the less well-established clergy to rent out their storefront spaces to the gangs for business meetings. "Five hundred gets you the back room or the basement, but that's just one time. And the pastor stays in the building. Seven hundred fifty gets you the place to yourself. And sometimes you want to *be* by yourself, depending on what you're going to discuss."

"Yeah," Price chimed in. "If you have to beat somebody's ass, you might want to be alone."

I asked for a little time to think things over.

The four of us left the restaurant and got into J.T.'s Malibu for our next task: a meeting with Johnny, a man who owned a convenience store and no longer allowed members of the Black Kings inside. I already knew Johnny. He was a local historian of sorts who liked to regale me with stories of the 1960s and 1970s, when he was a gang leader himself. But he stressed how the gangs of that period were totally different. They were political organizations, he said, fighting police harassment and standing up for the community's right to a fair share of city services. In his view, today's gangs were mostly moneymaking outfits with little understanding of, or commitment to, the needs of Chicago's poor black population.

Johnny's store was on Forty-seventh Street, a busy commercial

strip that bisected Robert Taylor. The strip was lined with liquor stores, check-cashing shops, party-supply and hardware stores, a few burned-out buildings and empty lots, a public-assistance center, two beauty salons, and a barbershop.

I wasn't very worried about meeting with Johnny until Price spoke up. "We've also got a problem with this nigger," he said, "because he's been charging us more than he charges other niggers."

"You mean he rips off only people in the Black Kings?" I asked.

"That's right," said J.T. "And this one is hard, because Johnny is T-Bone's uncle. He's also a dangerous motherfucker. He'll use a gun just like that. So you got to be careful."

"No, *you* have to be careful," I said. "I told you I won't use a gun."

"No one said *you* have to," Price offered, laughing from the backseat. "But *he* might!"

"What exactly is it that I'm supposed to do?" I asked. "You want me to make him charge you fair prices?"

"Well, this is a tough one," J.T. said, "because we can't have people taking advantage of us, you dig? But the thing is, we provide this nigger protection."

"Protection?"

"Yeah, say somebody steals something. Then we find out who did it and we deal with it."

"So he can't tell us that we can't come in his store," Price said. "Not if we're providing him a service."

"Right," said J.T. "We have to try and remind him that he's paying us to help him, and it doesn't look good if he doesn't let us come in his store. See, what he's doing is trying to make back the money that he's paying us for protection."

Johnny was out front when we pulled up, smoking a cigarette. "What's up, Sudhir?" he said. "I see you wasting your time again, hanging around these niggers."

Johnny looked like a caricature of a disco-era hustler: bright orange pants, a polyester shirt that appeared to be highly flammable, cowboy boots with fake diamond trim, and lots of ghetto glitter—fake rubies and other stones—on his fingers. A tattoo on his arm read BLACK BITCH, and another on his chest said PENTHOUSE KINGS, which was the name of his long-ago street gang.

J.T., Price, and I followed Johnny into the back of the store while T-Bone peeled off to attend to some other business. The back room was musty and unswept. The walls were plastered with pictures of naked black women and a big poster of Walter Payton, the beloved Chicago Bears running back. The sturdy shelves and even the floor were crammed with used TV sets, stereo components, and microwaves that Johnny fixed and sold. A big wooden table held the remnants of last night's poker game: cards and chips, cigar butts, some brandy, and a ledger tallying debts. Through the open back door, a small homeless encampment was visible. J.T. had told me that Johnny paid a homeless couple fifty dollars a week to sleep outside and watch over the store.

We all sat down around the table. Johnny seemed impatient. "All right," he said, "what are we going to do?"

"Well, we were thinking more like what *you* were going to do, nigger," Price said.

"Listen, big black," Johnny said, cigarette dancing in his lips, "you can take that mouth outside if you can't say something useful."

J.T. told Price to go back to the car, leaving just me, J.T., and Johnny.

"You're paying us, Johnny," J.T. said, "and now you're *charging* us. You trying to make your money back? Is that it?"

Johnny replied in a calm monotone. "You niggers charge me two hundred and fifty dollars a month, and that shit has to stop," he said. "A man can't run a business if he has to pay that kind of money.

And your boys keep coming in here demanding free shit. I told Moochie and the rest of them that if they come in here anymore, this .22 is going to find their back." He gestured to a rifle hanging behind him on the wall.

"See now, that's the kind of talk we don't need," J.T. said. "I mean, we need to cooperate."

"Cooperate, my ass!" said Johnny. "You can cooperate with my fist."

"Whoa, whoa!" I yelled, trying to be useful. "Let's calm down now, boys. What I think we need is a little—"

"Is this Arab going to sit here all day with us?" Johnny said.

"Leave that boy alone," J.T. said. "I'll explain later." He shot me a glance, a *Shut the fuck up* glance. "Listen, you pay me two hundred dollars a month and you'll get the same shit from us." He was talking about the protection the gang afforded. "And I'll talk to Moochie and everyone else, tell them they can't steal shit. Okay?"

"Bitch, you better tell him not to bring his girlfriends up in here."

"What?"

"You heard me. He brings them bitches in here when I'm not around, showing off and taking shit off the shelves, eating candy and drinking soda like he owns the place. When my man tried to do something about it, he pulled a gun on him. Let him bring that shit on me. Try it once, I'll kill the little bitch."

"All right," J.T. said, putting his hand in front of Johnny's face to shut him up. "I told you *I'll* deal with the nigger."

"I pay you two hundred dollars and your boys get to come in here, but they have to promise to spend at least two hundred dollars a month on shit," Johnny said.

"And you're not going to jack up prices, right?" I said.

"Goddamn, Arab, you still here?" Johnny said. "Yeah, that's right, they pay what everyone else pays."

"Okay, then," I said, "we got ourselves a deal, boys!" I stood up to go.

"Boy, sit your ass down," J.T. said. "Johnny, we'll get back with you."

"Yeah, we'll get back with you," I said. "We need to deliberate."

Johnny and J.T. started laughing.

"Goddamn!" Johnny shouted. "You bring this Arab with you wherever you go?"

"One day," J.T. muttered, clearly frustrated that I was taking my role a little too seriously. "One day, that's it."

We got back in the Malibu. Price drove, J.T. rode shotgun, and I sat in the back. My next duty, J.T. explained, was to settle a dispute between two gang members, Billy and Otis. Billy was the director of a six-man drug-selling crew. Otis, one of his six dealers, was claiming that Billy had underpaid him for a day's work. Billy, meanwhile, said that Otis lied about how much crack he sold and kept the extra money. My dilemma would be compounded by the fact that I already knew both Billy and Otis.

As we drove, Price explained my goal: to adjudicate the case and determine a fair punishment. "If Billy didn't pay Otis, then you have to punish Billy," he said. "The punishment for not paying one of your members would be two mouthshots, and Billy can't work for a week. And if you want, you get to make Otis the director for that week. But if Otis *stole* something, then we have a bigger problem. You have to beat the shit out of that nigger, not just hit him twice. *And* he has to work free for a month."

The thought of hitting someone in the face—delivering a "mouthshot"—made me nauseous. Growing up, I used to get picked on all the time. I was tall and athletic, but I was also a nerd, com-

plete with pocket protector, bad haircut, and an armful of math and science books. I was a perfect target for the average football player or any other jock, especially since I played the less "manly" sports of tennis and soccer. I never even learned to throw a punch. In school most of the fights culminated with someone—most often a girl I was with—pleading for the bully to reconsider, or with me rolling up in a fetal ball, which I actually found to be quite a good strategy, since most bullies didn't want to fight someone who wouldn't fight back.

"Now, I don't mean to be picky," I said, "but isn't this why we have you here, Price? I mean, you're the security guy, no? *You* beat their ass—I mean, isn't that what you get paid for? And if I'm the leader, I can delegate, no?"

"Sudhir," J.T. said, "you have to realize that if you do that, then you lose respect. They need to see that you are the boss, which means that you hand out the beating."

"What if I make them do twenty pushups or fifty squat thrusts? Or maybe they have to clean my car."

"You don't own a car," J.T. said.

"That's right—so they have to clean *your* car for a month!"

"Listen, these guys already clean my car, wipe my ass, whatever I want, so that ain't happening," J.T. said calmly, as if wanting to make sure I understood the breadth of his power. "And if they can steal money or not pay somebody for working and they only have to clean a car, then think how much these guys will steal. You have to make sure they understand that they can't be stealing! Nigger, they need to *fear* you."

"So that's your leadership style? Fear?" I was trying to give the impression that I had my own style. Mostly, I was stalling out of worry that I'd have to throw a punch. "Fear, huh? Very interesting, very interesting."

We pulled up to the street corner where Billy and Otis had been told to meet us. It was cold, not quite noon, but the sun had broken through a bit. Aside from a nearby gas station, the corner was surrounded mostly by empty lots and abandoned buildings.

I watched Billy and Otis saunter over. Billy was about six foot six. He had been a star basketball player at Dunbar High School and won a scholarship to Southern Illinois at Carbondale, a small downstate school. He began using his connections with the Black Kings to deal marijuana and cocaine to students in his dorm. He eventually decided to quit the basketball team to sell drugs full-time. He once told me that the lure of cash "made my mouth water, and I couldn't get enough of it. Dumbest move I ever made." Now he was working in the gang to save money in hopes of returning to college.

I always liked Billy. He was one of thousands of people in this neighborhood who, by the time they turned eighteen, had made all sorts of important decisions by themselves. Fewer than 40 percent of the adults in the neighborhood had even graduated from high school, much less college, so Billy didn't have a lot of places to go for counsel. Even so, he was the first one to accept responsibility for the bad decisions he'd made. I'll never forget what he said when he moved back to the projects after dropping out of college: "I just needed someone to talk to. My mind was racing out of control, and I had no one to talk to."

I didn't want to think about hitting Billy today, because I really liked him—and because, at that height, his jaw was nearly out of reach.

Otis was a different story. He always wore dark sunglasses—even indoors, even in winter—and he kept a large knife underneath a long black jacket that he always wore, even in hot weather. He loved to cut people up and give them a scar. And he didn't like me at all.

This acrimony stemmed from a basketball game several months

earlier. I regularly attended the gang's midnight games at the Boys & Girls Club. If Autry came up one referee short, he sometimes pressed me into service. I had played basketball growing up, but not how it was played in the ghetto. In my neighborhood we set picks, passed the ball—and, perhaps most important, called fouls, even in pickup games. In the gang games, if you called even half the fouls that were actually committed, you'd run out of players by halftime. But during one game I refereed when Otis was playing, I called five quick fouls on him because . . . well, because he fouled somebody five times. He had to leave the game.

From the bench, with a cheap bottle of liquor in his hand, Otis shouted at me, "I'm going to kill you, motherfucker! I'm going to cut your balls off!" It was pretty hard to concentrate for the rest of the game.

I left the gym immediately afterward, but Otis chased me down in the parking lot. He was still in his uniform, so he didn't have his machete with him. He picked up a bottle from the asphalt, smashed it, and pressed the jagged edge to my neck. Just then Autry hustled into the parking lot, pulled Otis back, and told me to run. I stood there in shock while Autry kept yelling, "Run, nigger, run!" After about thirty seconds, he and Otis both started laughing, because my feet simply wouldn't move. They laughed so hard that they crumpled to the ground. I nearly threw up.

I was thinking of this incident now, as Otis walked toward us, and I wondered if he was, too. I got out of the car along with J.T. and Price.

"Okay, let's hear what happened," J.T. said. "I need to know who fucked up last week. Billy, you first."

J.T. seemed preoccupied, maybe a little upset. I didn't know why, and it wasn't the time to ask. It certainly didn't seem as if I had much chance of leading the conversation.

"Like I already said," Billy began, "ain't nothing to say. Otis got a hundred-pack and was a hundred dollars short. I want my money." He was stubborn and defiant.

"Nigger, please," Otis said. "You ain't paid me for a week. You *owed* me that money." Otis's eyes were bloodshot, and he looked as if he might reach out and hit Billy at any moment.

"Didn't pay?" said Billy. "You're wrong on that. I paid you, and you went out that night partying. I remember."

The director of a sales team—in this case, Billy—usually gave his street dealers an allotment of prepackaged crack. A "100-pack" was the standard. A single bag sold for ten dollars, so once the dealer exhausted his inventory, he was supposed to give his director one thousand dollars. Billy was saying that Otis had turned over just nine hundred dollars. Otis's only defense seemed to be that Billy owed him money from an earlier transaction—a charge that Billy denied. Otis and Billy kept arguing with each other, but they were looking at J.T., Price, and me, pleading their cases.

"Okay, okay!" J.T. said. "This ain't going nowhere. Get the fuck out of here. I'll be back with you later."

Billy and Otis walked away, joining the rest of their crew near some Dumpsters where they stored their drugs and money. Once they were out of earshot, J.T. turned to me: "Well, what do you think? You heard enough?"

"Yes, I did!" I said proudly. "Here's my decision: Otis clearly took the money and pocketed it. You notice that he never actually denied taking something. He just said that he was owed the money by Billy. Now, I can't tell whether Billy never paid Otis for the day's work, but the fact that Otis didn't deny stealing the money makes me feel that Billy forgot to pay Otis—or maybe he didn't want to. But all that doesn't matter, because Otis *did* steal some money. And, I bet, Billy *didn't* pay."

There was silence for about thirty seconds. Finally Price spoke up. "Hey, I like it. Not bad. That was the smartest thing you said all day!"

"Yeah," said J.T. "Now, what's the penalty?"

"Well, in this case we borrow from the NFL and invoke the offsetting-penalty rule," I said. "Both guys screwed up, so the two penalties cancel each other out. I know that Otis's crime is more serious because he stole, but both of them messed up. So no one gets hurt or pays a fine. How about that?"

More silence. Price watched J.T. for his reaction. I did the same. "Tell Otis to come over here," J.T. finally said. Price went to fetch him.

"What are you going to do?" I asked J.T. He said nothing. "C'mon, tell me." He ignored me.

Price returned with Otis.

"Wait for me over there," J.T. told me quietly, nodding toward the car.

I did as he said. I climbed into the backseat, which faced away from J.T. and the others. Still, I was close enough to hear J.T. tell Otis to put his hands behind his back. Then I heard a punch, fist hitting cheekbone, and after about ten seconds another one. Then, slowly, two more punches. I looked behind me through the back window and saw Otis, bent over, holding his face. J.T. was slowly walking back toward the car, shaking his fist. He got in, and then Price did, too.

"You can't let them steal," J.T. told me. "I liked your take on what happened. You're right, they both fucked up. Since we don't really know if Billy didn't pay, I can't beat him. But like you said, we *do* know that Otis stole something, because he didn't deny it. So I had to punish him. I let him off easy, though. I told him he only had to work free for a week."

I could hear Otis moaning in pain, like a sick cow. I asked quietly if he was okay. Neither J.T. nor Price answered. As we drove past Billy and Otis, I was the only one who looked over. Otis still had his head down, and he turned away as we passed. Billy just watched us drive by, completely expressionless.

We spent the next several hours driving around the South Side, covering the great swath of territory controlled not just by J.T.'s faction of the Black Kings but by other gangs within the BK nation.

As J.T. rose within the BKs' citywide hierarchy, part of his broader duty was to monitor several BK factions besides his own to make sure that sales proceeded smoothly and that neighboring gangs cooperated with one another. This meant that he now oversaw, directly or indirectly, several hundred members of the Black Kings.

There was a constant reshuffling and realignment of gang factions. This typically had less to do with dramatic events like a gang war and more to do with basic economics. When one local gang withered, it was usually because it was unable to supply enough crack to meet the demand or because the gang leader set his street dealers' wages too low to attract motivated workers. In such cases a gang's leadership might transfer its distribution rights to a rival gang, a sort of merger in which the original gang got a small cut of the profits and a lower rank in the merged hierarchy. If running a drug gang wasn't quite business as usual, it was nevertheless very much a business.

Today was the day that J.T. needed to visit all the four- and six-man sales teams occupying the street corners, parks, alleyways, and abandoned buildings where the Black Kings sold crack. He did this once a week. Because these visits were perhaps J.T.'s most important work, it was pretty obvious that I wasn't going to have much input.

But as J.T. drove to his first stop, he told me that I could at least tag along.

By now a second car had joined us, occupied by four junior gang members. They were J.T.'s security detail, driving ahead to each location and paging him to say it was safe from rival gangs.

As I watched J.T. question his sales teams, one after the next, I began to realize that he truly was an accomplished manager. All his members knew the drill. As soon as J.T. reached a site, the sales team's director would approach him alone and instruct his troops to stop all sales activity. One member, taking all the cash and drugs, left the area entirely so that the police couldn't link J.T. directly to the drug sales. It was unclear to me whether this was J.T.'s idea or standard practice in gangland, but when it came to avoiding the police, J.T. was meticulous.

In order to keep himself clear, he never carried a gun, drugs, or large amounts of cash. Even though he occasionally alluded to cops he knew personally, men who'd grown up with him in the neighborhood, he was always sketchy as to whether he held any real influence among the police. Whatever the case, he didn't seem all that concerned about getting arrested. In his view the police could come after him whenever they wanted, but it was in their best interest to let familiar faces run the drug businesses. "They just want to control shit," he told me, "and that's why they really only come after us maybe once in a while."

His street dealers, however, were constantly getting arrested. From a legal standpoint this was mostly a nuisance; from a business standpoint, however, it posed a disastrous disruption of J.T.'s revenue flow. If a dealer went to prison, J.T. sometimes sent money to his family, but he was also worried that the dealer might decide to give testimony to the police in exchange for a reduced sentence. J.T. was

more generous when it came to dealers killed in the line of duty. He nearly always paid their families a generous cash settlement.

As he met now with each sales director, J.T. would begin by grilling him with a standard set of questions: *You losing any of your regulars?* (In other words, customers.) *Anybody complaining?* (About the quality of the crack.) *You heard of people leaving you for others?* (Customers buying crack from other dealers.) *Anybody watching you?* (The police or tenant leaders.) *Any new hustlers been hanging around?* (Homeless people or street vendors.) *You seen any niggers come around?* (Enemy gangs.)

After answering these questions, the director had to report on the sales activity over the past week: a summary of the week's receipts, any drugs that had been lost or stolen, the names of any gang members who'd been causing trouble. J.T. was most concerned with the weekly drug revenues—not just because his own salary derived from these revenues but because of the tribute tax he had to send each month to his superiors. J.T. had told me earlier that his bosses occasionally changed their tax rate, even doubling it, for no good reason (at least no good reason that J.T. was ever told about). When this happened, J.T. had to dip into his own pocket. A few months before, he'd had to contribute five thousand dollars to help build up the gang's arsenal of weapons, and he wasn't at all happy about it.

These pressures, combined with his constant fear that his junior members were planning a coup d'état, made J.T. paranoid about being ripped off. He had told me of several such coups in other neighborhoods. So he practically interrogated his sales directors, asking the same question in a variety of ways or otherwise trying to trip them up.

"So you sold fifty bags, okay, that's fine," J.T. might start.

"No, I said we sold twenty-five," the director would answer.

"No, you said fifty, I could have sworn you said fifty. Everyone else heard fifty, right?"

"No, no, no. I said twenty-five."

Invariably J.T. and the young man directing his sales team—these directors were usually in their late teens or early twenties—would go back and forth like this for several minutes, often over a trivial detail, until J.T. felt confident that he was getting the truth. On this day, as the cold afternoon stretched into night, I watched several of these young men sweat under J.T.'s questioning. Surely they all knew by now what to expect of him. But even a hint of suspicion could earn them a "violation": J.T. was quick to physically punish them or suspend their privileges—the right to carry a gun, for instance, or the right to earn money.

J.T. also asked his directors about any behavior in the past week that might have attracted the attention of the police—a dispute between a customer and a dealer, perhaps, or any gunfire. If one of his members had been suspended from high school or had drawn complaints from a tenant leader, he would have to submit to even tougher questioning from J.T.

For the directors, the worst part of this interrogation was that J.T. maintained his own independent sources. He kept a roster of informants in every neighborhood where the Black Kings operated. He had begun this practice when he first became responsible for monitoring neighborhoods that he didn't know as well as his own. While he may have been familiar with the streets and stores in these neighborhoods, he didn't know every pastor, tenant leader, police officer, and hustler as he did in his own.

Most of his informants were homeless people, squatters, or other hard-up adults. They came cheap—J.T. paid most of them just ten or fifteen dollars a day—and these ghetto nomads could easily hang out in drug areas and spy on J.T.'s gang members without raising suspicion. J.T. generally dispatched his senior officers to debrief these informants, but sometimes he met with them personally. Although they couldn't tell him if his own members were stealing from him, they were valuable for reporting problems like street fights or customer complaints.

As we drove through the neighborhood, past the blighted storefronts on Forty-seventh Street, J.T. told me that one of his sales groups was selling diluted product. The BKs' crack-selling chain began with J.T.'s senior officers buying large quantities of powder cocaine from a distributor in the outlying suburbs or a neighborhood at the city's edge. The officers usually cooked up the cocaine into crack themselves, using a vacant apartment or paying a tenant perhaps a hundred dollars a month to use her kitchen. Then the officers would deliver the prepackaged allocations to the sales directors.

Sometimes, however, the street crews were allowed to cook up the crack themselves. In such a case, J.T. explained, they might surreptitiously use an additive to stretch their cocaine allotment into more crack. They could turn each 100-pack of $10 bags into a 125-pack, which meant earning an extra $250. This money obviously wouldn't be susceptible to collection by J.T., since he could account only for 100-packs.

I was surprised that J.T. would give anyone a chance to rip him off like this. But he now had so many crews under management, with such overwhelming volume, that he occasionally farmed out the production. It was a relatively simple process: you mixed together powder cocaine with baking soda and water, then boiled off the water until all that remained were the crystallized nuggets of crack. Subcontracting the production also provided J.T. a hedge of sorts: even if the police raided one of the apartments where the crack was being processed, he wouldn't lose his entire supply of cocaine.

The sale of diluted crack troubled J.T. for reasons beyond the ob-

vious fact that his members were stealing from him. Such entrepreneurial energy could be infectious. If other factions of the gang thought up schemes to increase their revenues, not only would J.T. lose taxable receipts but his sales directors might feel empowered to try to knock him off his throne. He was also concerned about the physical dangers of diluted crack cocaine. Not long ago a teenager in Robert Taylor had nearly died of an overdose, and rumor had it that one of J.T.'s dealers had sold him crack that had been processed with a dangerous additive. As a result the building president got the police to post a twenty-four-hour patrol for two weeks, which shut down drug sales. J.T.'s superiors nearly demoted him because of this incident, out of concern that he couldn't control his members.

J.T.'s other worry about altered crack was a simple matter of competitive practice: if word got out that the Black Kings were selling an inferior product, they would lose customers to other gangs. This was what troubled him most, J.T. told me now as we drove to meet with Michael, a twenty-year-old gang member who had recently been promoted to run a six-man sales team.

One of J.T.'s informants had told him that Michael's crew was selling diluted product. The informant was in fact a crack addict; J.T. had him buy the crack and turn it over to J.T., who could tell from its color and brittle texture that the crack had indeed been stretched.

J.T. asked me what I would do if I were the gang boss and had to deal with Michael.

"Kick him out!" I said.

J.T. explained that this decision couldn't be so straightforward. "Most guys wouldn't even think of these ways to make money," he said. "Here's a guy who is looking to make an extra buck. I have hundreds of people working for me, but only a few who think like that. You don't want to lose people like that." What he needed to do, J.T.

told me, was quash Michael's tactic but not the spirit that lay at its root.

When we reached Michael, J.T. told his officers and security detail to leave him alone with Michael. He asked me to stay. We went into the alleyway behind a fast-food restaurant.

"See this?" J.T. said, holding up a tiny Ziploc bag to Michael's face. "What is it?"

"It's mine," Michael said. I had no idea how he could tell that the crack was his, and I wondered if he said so simply as a reflex.

Michael had a stoic look about him, as if he were expecting to be punished. The rest of his crew watched from perhaps ten yards away.

"Yeah, that's right, and it's half what it should be," J.T. said.

"You want us to fill it up with more than that?"

"Don't play with me, nigger. I know you been putting some shit in the product. I have the shit with me right here. How are you going to deny it?"

Michael was silent.

"I'm going to tell you what we're going to do," J.T. said. "I'm not going to put you on the spot. You're going to finish selling this, and next week you're not earning shit. Your take goes to all the other guys. And you know what? You're going to tell them, too. You're going to tell them why it's no good to make this weaker. You know why, right?"

Michael, his head down, nodded.

"Okay, then, you're going to tell them it's not right because we lose customers and then we don't have no work. And you're going to tell them that it was your idea, that you fucked up, and that as a way of dealing with it, you want them to have the money you would have made."

Michael was by now visibly upset, his face set in a sort of angry mope. Finally he looked up, groaned, shook his head, glanced away, kicked a few stones on the ground. It seemed as if he wanted to challenge J.T., but he had obviously been caught. So he said nothing. After a while J.T. called over the other members of Michael's group and finished obtaining his weekly report.

It had been dark for a few hours now. My stint as gang leader for a day—albeit in a very limited capacity—was finally over. It was both more banal and more dramatic than I could have envisioned. I was exhausted. My head was spinning with details, settled and unsettled. I never did manage to decide how much the Black Kings should pay Pastor Wilkins for the use of his church.

I had accompanied J.T. on site visits to roughly twenty Black Kings sales teams. Two sales directors had been taken off to a secluded area and given mouthshots for their transgressions. Another one, who had failed to make his weekly payment to J.T., was levied a 10 percent fine and a 50 percent deduction of his next week's pay. But J.T. used the carrot as well as the stick. The workers in one group who had done particularly well were allowed to carry guns over the weekend. (J.T. usually didn't let his members walk around armed unless there was a war going on; he also required that members buy guns directly from the gang.) And he gave a $250 bonus to the members of another group that had several weeks of above-average sales.

There seemed to be no end to the problems that J.T. encountered during this weekly reconnaissance, problems he'd have to fix before they spun out of control. There were several incidents of customers fighting in public with a BK member who sold them drugs; in each case the customer complained that the bag of crack was too small or that the product was not of suitable quality. A store owner reported to J.T. that several gang members demanded he give *them* his monthly "protection" payment; this couldn't have been a legitimate request,

since J.T. allowed only his senior officers to pick up extortion receipts. A pastor called the police on one of J.T.'s members who used the church parking lot to receive oral sex (in lieu of cash payment) from a local drug user. And two gang members had been suspended from school for fighting, one of them for having a gun in his locker.

The next day I would wake up free of the hundreds of obligations and judgments I'd been witness to. But J.T. wouldn't. He'd still bear all the burdens of running a successful underground economy: enforcing contracts, motivating his members to risk their lives for low wages, dealing with capricious bosses. I was no less critical of what he did for a living. I also wanted to know more about his professed benevolence and how his gang acted on behalf of Robert Taylor's tenants. And I still knew very little about J.T.'s bosses.

But all that would take some time. My next set of answers about life in Robert Taylor came from the *second*-most-powerful force in my orbit, the woman known to one and all as Ms. Bailey.

FIVE

Ms. Bailey's Neighborhood

I ran into Ms. Bailey pretty regularly. Sometimes she accompanied J.T. as he made his rounds of the building; sometimes I'd see her with a police officer or a CHA official. She always said hello and politely introduced me to whomever she was with. But I didn't really know what she did or how she did it. Although she was present at the backroom gang negotiation I witnessed at the Boys & Girls Club, she hadn't gotten very involved. So I was curious to learn more about her.

Specifically, I wanted to know why residents spoke of her with a mixture of reverence and fear, much as they spoke of J.T. "Oh, you don't want to mess with Ms. Bailey," they'd say. Or, "Yeah, Ms. Bailey can tell you a lot about what's happening, but make sure you have five dollars with you." Even J.T., who agreed that I should spend some time with Ms. Bailey, vaguely hinted that I ought to be careful around her.

Part of my motivation to observe Ms. Bailey came from my ad-

visers at the University of Chicago. Jean Comaroff, an accomplished ethnographer, said that I was spending too much time with men. Since two-thirds of the community were women raising children, she suggested that I try to better understand how women managed households, secured services from the CHA, and otherwise helped families get by. Bill Wilson told me that poverty scholars knew little about the role women played in community affairs, and he encouraged me to spend time with household leaders like Ms. Mae but also tenant leaders like Ms. Bailey. Wilson and Comaroff both advised me to exercise the same sort of caution with Ms. Bailey as I would with other powerful people, never taking what they told me at face value.

Ms. Bailey was of average height and stout. Because of arthritis in her knees, she walked slowly, but always looking straight ahead with great focus, like Washington crossing the Delaware. She had a tattoo on her right arm that read MO-JO—the nickname, Ms. Mae told me, of a son who'd passed away. Ms. Bailey had pudgy fingers and, when she shook your hand, the tightest grip I've ever felt.

Her title was building president of the Local Advisory Council (LAC). This was an elected position that paid a part-time wage of a few hundred dollars a month. The official duties of a building president included lobbying the CHA for better building maintenance, obtaining funds for tenant activities, and so on. Elections were held every four years, and incumbents were rarely deposed. Some LAC presidents were much more powerful than others, and from what I'd heard, Ms. Bailey was on the upper end of the power scale. She had actually fought for the creation of the LAC many years ago, and she kept her fighting spirit. I'd heard stories about Ms. Bailey getting medical clinics to give free checkups to the children in her building and local stores to donate food.

I witnessed this fighting spirit firsthand when I visited her small, decrepit office one day. I wanted to explain why I'd been hanging

around her building and also explain my research. I began by discussing the prevailing academic wisdom about urban poverty and the factors that contributed to it.

"You planning on talking with white people in your study?" she snapped, waving her hand at me as if she'd heard my spiel a hundred times already.

I was confused. "This is a study of the Robert Taylor Homes, and I suppose that most of the people I'll be talking to are black. Unless there are whites who live here that I'm not aware of."

"If I gave you only *one* piece of bread to eat each day and asked why you're starving, what would you say?"

I was thrown off by this seeming non sequitur. I thought for a minute. "I guess I would say I'm starving because I'm not eating enough," I answered.

"You got a lot to learn, Mr. Professor," she said. "Again, *if I gave you* one piece of bread to eat each day and asked why you're starving, what would you say?"

I was getting even more confused. I took a chance. "Because you're not feeding me?"

"Yes! Very good!"

I felt relieved. I hoped no more tests were coming my way, but Ms. Bailey kept going. "Let's say I took away your house key and you had to sleep outside," she said. "A man from the city comes over and counts you as 'homeless.' What would you say?"

"Umm." This one seemed even harder. "I'd say you're wrong. I *have* a place to stay, so . . . no! I'm not homeless!" I thought I had nailed this one.

But she looked exasperated at my answer. "Wow, have you ever had to do *anything* for yourself?" she said.

I was at least smart enough to know that she wasn't literally asking me to reply.

"If I took your house key away," she barked, "what does that make you?" She leaned across the desk, and I could feel her breath on my face.

"Well, I guess you robbed me. So I'm not homeless, I'm a victim."

"Okay, we're getting somewhere. Now let's say I tell the police to stop coming to *your* block and to go only where *I* live. And then I write that you live in a crime-infested neighborhood, that there's more crime on your block than mine. What would you say?"

"Well, I guess I'd say that it's not really fair because you have all the police, so—"

"Mr. Professor, we're really getting moving now!" Ms. Bailey threw up her hands in mock celebration. "Okay, so let's go back to the original question. You want to understand how black folks live in the projects. Why we are poor. Why we have so much crime. Why we can't feed our families. Why our kids can't get work when they grow up. So will you be studying white people?"

"Yes," I said. I understood, finally, that she also wanted me to focus on the people outside Robert Taylor who determined how the tenants lived day to day.

"But don't make us the victim," she said. "We'll take responsibility for what we can control. It's just that not everything is in our hands."

Our subsequent meetings were much the same. I would walk in to discuss an issue—the 60 percent dropout rate, for instance, among the project's high-school kids. "Research today says that if kids can get through high school, they have a twenty-five percent greater likelihood of escaping poverty," I said, as if giving a lecture. "So *early* education—keeping them in school—is the key. Also—"

Ms. Bailey interrupted. "If your family is starving and I tell

you that I'll give you a chance to make some money, what are you going to do?"

"Make the money. I have to help my family."

"But what about school?" she said.

"I guess it will have to wait."

"Until what?"

"Until my family gets enough to eat."

"But you should stay in school, right?" she said, sarcasm rising in her voice. "That's what will help you leave poverty." She paused. Then she smiled triumphantly and made no effort to hide her patronizing tone. "So . . . you said you wanted to talk with me about high-school dropouts?"

It took a while, but I eventually realized there was no point in trying to act even remotely authoritative around Ms. Bailey. There was part of me that felt like the expert researcher, but only a very small part. Once I learned that there was no way around Ms. Bailey's Socratic browbeating, I decided to give in and just let her teach me.

I usually dropped by her office during the hours she reserved for open visitation from tenants; otherwise it could be hard to track her down. When a tenant came by, Ms. Bailey would ask me to step out. Our longest conversations, therefore, rarely lasted beyond fifteen minutes. Ms. Bailey remained formal with me, as if she were keeping her guard up. She never shared details about specific tenants; instead she spoke in generalities about "families who live around here."

After a few months of this, I told J.T. that I was frustrated by my interactions with Ms. Bailey. I couldn't tell if she trusted me.

J.T. enjoyed seeing me struggle. He had warned me that getting to know her wouldn't be easy and perhaps wasn't even worth trying. "It took a while before I let you talk with my boys," he said.

"What makes you think she'll just walk you around and show you everybody? Things don't go so fast around here."

He had a point. If Ms. Bailey needed time to feel comfortable with me, then I would just have to wait.

As the Chicago winter began to settle in, Ms. Bailey asked me to help her with a clothing drive. Tenants and squatters in her building needed winter coats, she said, as well as blankets and portable heaters. She wanted me to collect donations with her from several stores that had agreed to contribute.

A friend of mine let me borrow his car, a battered yellow and brown station wagon. When I went to collect Ms. Bailey at her building, she was carrying a large plastic bag. She grunted as she bent over to pick it up and again as she set it down on the floor of the car. With labored breaths, she directed me to our first stop: a liquor store a few blocks from her building.

She instructed me to drive around the back. She told me she didn't want the manager to see me, but she didn't explain why.

I parked in the alley as Ms. Bailey went inside. Five minutes later a few employees came out the back door and began loading the station wagon with cases of beer and bottles of liquor. Nothing expressly for winter, I noted, although a stiff bourbon could certainly help take the sting off the Chicago cold. Ms. Bailey climbed into the car. This donation, she told me, was made with the understanding that she would direct her tenants to visit this liquor store exclusively when they needed booze.

We drove a few miles to a grocery store on Stony Island Avenue. We went in the back way and met with a man who appeared to be the manager.

"Hey, sweetheart," Ms. Bailey said. She introduced me to Mr.

Baldwin, a large, pear-shaped black man with a round face and a wide grin. He had a clipboard in his hand, marking off the sides of beef hanging from a ceiling rack.

Mr. Baldwin gave Ms. Bailey a hug. "I got what you want, babe," he said. "All in the back. I got them ready for you yesterday."

He pointed us toward a younger man, who led us over to a few big garbage bags filled with puffy black jackets. At first glance they looked exactly like the jacket the young man was wearing, which had the name of the grocery store prominently displayed on the sleeves and chest. *Were* they the same jackets? I wondered if Ms. Bailey's tenants would wear clothing with a grocery store's name on it.

As I hauled the bags to the car, Ms. Bailey shouted at me. "And bring three cases of beer in here, Sudhir!"

I did as I was told. Even I, middle-class naïf that I was, could sense a horse trade.

Back in the car, Ms. Bailey anticipated my question. "I know you're wondering what we were doing at the food store," she said. "Take a look at the jackets." I reached into the backseat and grabbed one. It smelled distinctly of bleach, as if it had been disinfected. The store's patch had been either removed or covered up with another, even larger patch. It read ROBERT TAYLOR PRIDE.

Ms. Bailey smiled. "Those jackets are warmer than what most families can buy in the stores. These workers are sitting in a meat locker all day, so you know they have to stay warm. The manager donates about twenty to me each Christmas."

"And the patches?" I asked.

"The guy who makes the jackets for him does it for free—for us."

"And the beer?"

Ms. Bailey just smiled and told me where to drive next.

We hit several more stores that day. At Sears, Ms. Bailey exchanged pleasantries with the manager, and they asked about each

other's families. Then he handed over a few boxes of children's coats; Ms. Bailey directed me to put the rest of the beer in his car. At a dollar store, Ms. Bailey traded some of the liquor for a bundle of blankets. At a hardware store, Ms. Bailey gave the manager the heavy plastic bag she'd brought along, and he gave her three portable heaters.

"Don't ask what's in the bag," she told me as I carried the heaters back to the car. "When I know you better, I'll tell you."

Only once did Ms. Bailey receive a donation that was actually a donation—that is, something for free. At one grocery store, she got some canned food without having to exchange any beer or liquor.

By the time we finished, we were on the far southern edge of the city. We hit traffic on the drive back to Robert Taylor, which gave me the opportunity to pepper Ms. Bailey with questions.

"When did you start doing this?" I asked.

Ms. Bailey told me that she had grown up in public housing herself. Back then, charities, churches, city agencies, and individual volunteers all helped out in the projects. "But the volunteers don't come around anymore," she said wistfully. "Have you seen any of those nice white people since you've been around? I didn't think so. Nobody gives us money, nobody runs programs. Not a lot of people are doing the free-food thing anymore. Even the churches really don't do what they did in the past."

"But I don't understand why the people we saw today want to give you things. I mean, how did you get to know them?"

"Well, first of all, most of them grew up in Robert Taylor or they have family in the projects. Lots of middle-class people don't like to talk about it, but they came from the projects. It's easy to forget where you came from. But I try and remind these people that they were once like us. And a few times a year, they do the right thing."

"So why give them beer and liquor?" I asked. "If it's a donation, it should be for free, no?"

"Well, things ain't always that simple," Ms. Bailey said. She brought up the incident I'd seen some months back, when the woman named Boo-Boo wanted to kill the Middle Eastern shopkeeper who'd slept with her teenage daughter. "That's what a *lot* of women have to do around here to get some free food," she said. "I don't want to see it come to that. So if I have to give away a few bottles of gin, that's fine with me."

Back at her office, Ms. Bailey organized the winter gear and prepared large baskets filled with canned food and meat. Word spread quickly, and families from her building soon began to drop by. Some were shy, others excited. But everyone seemed happy, and I watched as children smiled when they tried on a new coat or a warm sweater.

I noticed that some people received food but no clothing. Others got a jacket but no food. And some people just stood around until Ms. Bailey told them, "We don't have anything for you today." She said this even though the food baskets and clothing were in plain view, so I didn't know why she was withholding the gifts from them. Did she play favorites with some families?

One day Clarisse, the prostitute, walked into Ms. Bailey's office. There were several women already in front of her. Ms. Bailey's assistant, Catrina, was writing their names and noting exactly what each of them received.

"You got something for me today?" Clarisse asked, a lilt in her voice. Then her eyes landed on me briefly, but I didn't seem to register. She smelled like liquor; her blouse was undone so that one of

her breasts was nearly popping out. Despite the cold weather, Clarisse was wearing a black miniskirt and sliding around perilously on high heels. Her face looked vacant, and her mouth was frothy. I had never seen her in this condition before. She had told me herself that she didn't do drugs.

"You're messed up," Catrina said, peering over her thick glasses. "You need to shower."

Ms. Bailey was in the next room, speaking with a tenant. "Ms. Bailey, look who's here!" Catrina called out. "Ms. Bailey, you need to tell her to get out of the office!" Catrina turned back to Clarisse and shot her a disapproving look.

Ms. Bailey came out and told Catrina to calm down. Then she motioned for Clarisse to come inside. As she closed the door, she rolled her eyes at me and sighed. I couldn't make out the whole conversation—it was unclear, in fact, if Clarisse was talking at all—but some of Ms. Bailey's proclamations were plainly audible.

"Get yourself clean or you ain't getting nothing! . . . Don't embarrass yourself, coming in here high on that shit! . . . You call yourself a mother? You ain't no mother. You *could* be one, if you stopped smoking that junk!"

The door opened, and Clarisse stumbled out, tears in her eyes. She dropped her purse and then, as she stopped to pick it up, tripped and fell, ramming into the pile of donation baskets. As she tried getting up, Clarisse vomited, some of it landing on the baskets.

Catrina and I jumped over to help her. Both of us slipped on the vomit. A strong wind blew in from outside, and the smell filled the room. Clarisse resisted our help, but she couldn't manage to get up by herself. Her pretty face had turned pale and pasty.

"Grab her and get her out of here!" Catrina yelled. She had to say this two more times before I realized that she was talking to me. "Sudhir! Grab her and take her home. Now!"

I tried being delicate with Clarisse. She was falling out of her clothes, and I didn't quite know how to touch her. She began throwing up again, and this time it landed on my arm.

"Sudhir!" Catrina yelled.

Clarisse was on all fours by now. She was drooling and heaving, but nothing came out. This time I wrapped my arms around her stomach and yanked her up. I figured I'd better get her out of the office even if I had to drag her.

"That bitch don't want me to feed my babies," Clarisse moaned. "I need food to feed my babies!" She started looking around frantically—for her purse, I realized.

"Clarisse, just a few more feet," I said. "I'll get your bag, don't worry. But let's get you out of the office."

"My bag!" she wailed. "My bag, I need my bag!"

She started kicking and flailing, trying to make her way back inside the office. With one last effort, I heaved her upright, causing us both to stumble and slam against the gallery's chain-link fencing. She sank back to the floor. I hoped I hadn't hurt her, but I couldn't tell.

As I turned to retrieve her purse, I saw Ms. Bailey, standing in the doorway. She held the purse in her hands.

"Is this what she wants?" Ms. Bailey asked. "Is it?!" I nodded. "Look inside. You want to help this lady, then look and see why she wants her bag."

I shook my head, staring at the floor.

"Look!" Ms. Bailey snapped at me. She strode over and held the bag up to my face. I saw a few condoms, some lipsticks, pictures of her daughters, and a few bags of either heroin or cocaine.

"Have to have that fix, don't you, baby?" Ms. Bailey asked Clarisse, sneering. We all stood there for what felt like an hour but was probably only a few seconds. Catrina tried to interrupt, but Ms. Bailey waved her off.

"Go ahead, Sudhir, take her home," Ms. Bailey said. She bent over to stare down at Clarisse. "If I see your babies coming over and telling me that they ain't eaten no food in three days, I'm taking them away. You hear?"

Ms. Bailey turned and left. Catrina, with a disinterested look, handed me some paper towels. I bent down to wipe the vomit and tears from Clarisse's face. She didn't resist this time when I helped her up.

I walked Clarisse upstairs to her apartment and led her to the couch. The apartment was dark, and I figured it would be best to let her sleep. In a back room, her two daughters were sitting on a queen-size bed. They looked to be about two and four years old and were watching the TV intently. I closed the door to their room and put a glass of water on the table next to Clarisse. The scene was a study in contrasts. The apartment was neat and cozy, with wall hangings and framed pictures throughout, some of Jesus Christ and some of family members. It smelled as if it had just been cleaned. And then there was Clarisse on the couch, breathing heavily, eyelids drooping, a total mess.

When I had first met her, on the gallery outside J.T.'s apartment, Clarisse had set herself apart from other prostitutes—the "hypes and rock stars"—who sold sex for drugs. Plainly, she had lied to me about not using drugs; I guess she'd wanted to make a decent impression. At this moment I wasn't too concerned about her lies. She needed help, after all. But it was pretty clear that I had to be careful about blindly accepting what people told me.

I sat on a recliner next to the couch. "I'm afraid to leave you here alone," I said. In the dim light, I couldn't really make out her facial expression. But she was breathing heavily, as if she'd just gone through battle. "Let me call an ambulance."

"I'm okay. I just need it to wear off."

"What about the kids? Have they eaten?"

"Ms. Bailey wouldn't give us nothing," she whimpered, a stage past crying. "Why she treat me like that? Why she treat me like that?"

I felt a sudden urge to make sure her kids were fed. I went into the bedroom, asked them to grab their jackets, and walked them over to a local sandwich shop. I bought them cheeseburgers, chips, and soda, and on the way home we stopped at a small grocery store. I had only fifteen dollars with me, but I told the owner, a Middle Eastern man, that the family hadn't eaten in a while. He shook his head—as if he'd heard this story a million times—and instructed me to get what I needed and just take it with me. When I told Clarisse's girls that we were going to fill up a shopping cart, they looked like I'd just given them free passes to Disney World. While they grabbed candy, I tried to sneak in a few cans of spaghetti—alas, one of the most nutritious items on the shelves—and some milk, cereal, and frozen dinners. When we got back, Clarisse was asleep. I put the food away, broke out a few Ring Dings for the kids, and put them in front of the TV again. They fixed on the cartoon images as if they'd never been gone. Since Clarisse was still sleeping, I left.

Two days later I returned to the building. Walking through the crowded lobby, nodding at the people I knew, I felt someone grab my arm and pull me into a corner. It was Ms. Bailey.

"You're sweet, you're young, you're good-looking, and these women will take advantage of you," she said. "Be careful when you help them."

"Her kids hadn't eaten," I said. "What could I do?"

"Her kids ate at my place *that morning*!" Ms. Bailey said. She tightened her grip on my arm and moved in even closer. "*I* make sure they eat. *No* children go hungry in my building. No, sir." She

tightened her grip even further, and it hurt. "These women need to do the right thing if they have a baby. You remember that if you have a child someday."

"I will."

"Mm-hmm, we'll see about that. For now, be careful when you help the women. They'll take advantage of you, and you won't know what hit you. And I can't be there to protect you." I wasn't sure exactly what Ms. Bailey meant.

I nodded anyway, mostly so Ms. Bailey would loosen her grip. When she finally let go, I walked up to J.T.'s apartment to wait for him. It was the second time I'd been warned that I couldn't be "protected." First J.T. and now Ms. Bailey. I decided not to tell anyone, including J.T., about the conversation I'd just had with Ms. Bailey. In fact, the conversation had put me so out of sorts that by the time I got upstairs, I told Ms. Mae I had some schoolwork to do and had to get going. She fixed me a plate of food for the bus ride home.

A few weeks later, Ms. Bailey invited me to the building's monthly meeting. It was open to all tenants and posed one of the few opportunities for people to publicly voice their problems.

There were about 150 tenant families in Ms. Bailey's building. That included perhaps six hundred people living there legally and another four hundred living off the books. These were either boarders who paid rent to the leaseholders or husbands and boyfriends who kept their names off the leases so the women qualified for welfare. There were likely another few hundred squatters or people living temporarily with friends, but they were unlikely to attend a tenant meeting.

Ms. Bailey didn't seem all that enthusiastic about these meetings,

but she let me know that she well understood their symbolic value. "They need to see that something is going on," she said, "even if nothing is going on."

The meeting was held in Ms. Bailey's office on a Saturday afternoon in December. Although it wasn't very cold outside, the radiator was at full blast and the windows were closed. Ms. Bailey entered the steaming room and calmly walked past the few dozen people assembled on folding chairs, parking herself up front. She always sat down in the same awkward way. Because she was so heavyset, and because she had arthritis in her legs, she usually had to grab someone or something to help ease herself into a chair.

I was surprised at the small turnout. The attendees were mostly women and mostly in their mid-fifties like Ms. Bailey. There were, however, a few younger women with children and a few men as well.

Ms. Bailey deliberately arranged a sheaf of papers in front of her. She motioned for a young woman to open up the window, but it wouldn't budge.

"Okay, this meeting is in session," Ms. Bailey said.

A well-dressed man toward the back of the room immediately jumped up. "I thought you said you'd talk with those boys!" he said. "They're still hanging out there, making all that damn noise. I can't get no sleep."

I assumed he was talking about the parties the Black Kings threw inside and outside the building.

"Did you make a note of that, Millie?" Ms. Bailey asked an old woman to her left. She was the official LAC recording secretary. Millie nodded while scribbling away.

"Okay," Ms. Bailey said, "go on, young man."

"Go on? I've *been* going on. I'm *tired* of going on. Each time I *come* here, I go on. I'm tired of it. Can you do something?"

"You got that, Millie?" Ms. Bailey asked, looking over the rims of her glasses.

"Mm-hmm," Millie answered. "He's tired of it, he's been going on, and he wants you to do something."

"You can probably leave out the tired part," Ms. Bailey said in a serious tone.

"Yes, okay," Millie said, scratching away in her notes.

"Will there be anything else, young man?" Ms. Bailey asked. He didn't say anything. "Okay, then, I'm figuring you don't want to talk about the fact that you're living here illegally. Is that right? Now, who's next? Nobody? Okay, then, we have some *serious* business to discuss. Before I take questions, let me tell you that Pride will be here on Tuesday registering all of you to vote. Please make sure to show up. It's very important we have a good turnout for them."

Pride was the organization I'd come across earlier, made up of ex–gang members and devoted to gang truces and voter registration. Ms. Bailey had already told me that she worked closely with them.

"What are we voting for?" asked a young woman in the front row.

"We're not actually voting, sweetheart. You need to register first. If you're already registered, you don't need to come. But I want every apartment in this building registered."

"Ain't you even a little bit concerned that we're just helping J.T. and the rest of them?" an older woman asked. "I mean, they're the only ones who seem to be getting something out of this."

"You want these boys to turn themselves around?" Ms. Bailey answered. "Then you got to take them seriously when they try to do right. It's better than them shooting each other."

"The voting hasn't done a damn thing for us!" someone cried out. "So why are you so accepting of what they're doing?" A chorus of "oohs" followed the question.

Ms. Bailey shushed the crowd. "Excuse me, Ms. Cartwright," she said. "If you're suggesting that I may be benefiting in any way by the voting stuff going on, you can just come out and say it."

"I'm not saying you *may* be benefiting," Ms. Cartwright said. "I'm saying you *are* benefiting. You get that new TV on your own, Ms. Bailey?"

This produced some more "oohs" and a round of outright giggling.

"Let me remind you," Ms. Bailey yelled, trying to reestablish order, "that we ain't had no harassment, no shooting, no killing for six months. And that's because these young men are getting right. So you can help them or you can just sit and moan. And about my TV. Who was the one that give you fifty bucks for your new fridge? And you, Ms. Elder, how exactly did you get that new mattress?"

No one answered.

"That's what I thought. You-all can keep up the bitchin' or you can realize that every one of us is benefiting from me helping these young men."

The rest of the meeting was similarly animated and followed this same pattern. Tenants accused Ms. Bailey of going easy on J.T.'s gang and personally benefiting from her alliance with them. She replied that her job was to help the tenants, period, and if that meant finding creative solutions to a multitude of problems, then she needed to be allowed such flexibility. To nearly every resident who complained, Ms. Bailey could cite an instance of giving money to that person for rent, for a utility bill, or to buy food or furniture. She plainly knew how to play the influence game. I'd been to her apartment a few times and, although she never let me stay for long, it was a testament to her skills: There were photos of her with political officials, several new refrigerators from the CHA, and cases of donated

food and liquor. One bedroom was practically overrun with stacks of small appliances that she would give to tenants in her favor.

At one point during the meeting, Ms. Bailey mentioned the "donations" that she regularly procured from the gang, to be applied to various tenants' causes. J.T. had repeatedly told me that he had to keep Ms. Bailey happy—having his junior members carry out her orders, for instance, and paying her each month for the right to sell drugs in the lobby. But this was the first time I ever heard Ms. Bailey admit to this largesse. In fact, she discussed it with a measure of pride, highlighting her ability to put the gang's ill-gotten gains to good use. Although none of the tenants said so, I also knew from J.T. that some of *them* received payoffs from the gang—in exchange for their silence or for allowing the gang to stash drugs, cash, or weapons in their apartments. For a poor family, it was hard to turn down the gang's money.

"Why are we even talking about J.T.?" asked an older man. "Why don't we just go to the police? Can you tell me what you get from taking their help—or their money?"

"You-all want this place clean," Ms. Bailey said. "You want this place safe. You want this and that. And you want it right away. Well, the CHA ain't doing nothing. So I have to find ways to take care of it."

"But we can't walk around safely," the man said. "My car got the windows shot out last year."

"Right," Ms. Bailey countered. "That was *last* year, and sometimes that happens. But you see this place getting cleaned up. You see people getting rides to the store. Who do you think is doing that? Before you go yelling at J.T. and the rest of them, you better understand that they're family, too. And they're *helping*—which is more than I can say for you."

That a tenant leader—one who was respected by politicians,

shop owners, the police, and others—would praise a crack gang and work so closely with *its* leader made me realize just how desperate people could become in the projects. But I was learning that Ms. Bailey's compromising position also arose out of her own personal ambitions: in order to retain her authority, she had to collaborate with the other power groups, in this case the gangs, who helped shape the status quo. This resulted in the bizarre spectacle of Ms. Bailey's publicly defending the very people who were shooting and causing trouble for her tenant families. Even though it was obvious that tenant leaders had few good choices, I still wasn't convinced that they needed to operate in such murky ethical waters. Nevertheless I found myself wondering how much Ms. Bailey's actions were actually a response to hardships that limited her options and how much arose from her own desire to have power.

As the meeting broke up, people approached Ms. Bailey for one-on-one conversations. They all had their grievances: no hot water or a broken sink, a child getting in trouble, prostitutes taking clients into the stairwell, crack addicts partying the whole night.

Afterward Ms. Bailey motioned me into her office. Catrina was looking over some notes she'd taken at the meeting. Ms. Bailey asked her to get together with Millie, the LAC secretary, to prepare a list of tenant concerns to pass along to the CHA.

Ms. Bailey opened a small refrigerator and took out sodas for all of us. Grabbing a small blue rag, she wiped her sweaty forehead. "Did that live up to your expectations?" she asked me with a wink.

"Well, I thought you were just going to make a few announcements!" I said, laughing. "What do you do with everything you heard? I mean, a lot of it was directed at you. They were saying some pretty harsh things."

"We tell the CHA that things ain't working in the building, and we try to get them to fix it. That's it."

"And do you tell them about residents accusing you of taking gang money?"

"We tell the CHA that things ain't working in the building, and we try to get them to fix it."

She smiled cunningly and looked over to Catrina, who returned the dutiful glance of an ever-loyal junior officer.

"Sudhir, you have to remember something," Ms. Bailey continued. "In the projects it's more important that you take care of the problem first. Then you worry about *how* you took care of the problem." I opened my mouth to object, but she stopped me. "If no one dies, then all the complaining don't mean nothing, because I'm doing my job. If all I got to worry about is a few people wondering where the money's coming from, then around here that's a good day! No one dies, no one gets hurt, I'm doing my job."

"That's an awful way to live," I blurted out.

"Now you're starting to understand," she said in a tone somewhere between pedantic and patronizing. "Maybe you're even starting to learn."

Someone knocked on the door, and Ms. Bailey got up to answer it. Catrina leaned in toward me. "Watch how she helps people," she whispered. "She says it don't matter, but she's amazing. Have you seen how she gets apartments fixed around here?"

I told her that I hadn't.

"Have you seen how she helps women around here?" Catrina pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and kept her voice low. I felt as if we were in high school and I was sneaking a conversation with the teacher's pet.

"Well, Ms. Bailey gives away food to the mothers, right?" I whispered back.

Catrina shook her head and inhaled deeply, looking disappointed

in me. "That's not what I'm talking about. You watch what she does when she helps women. Pay attention to *that*." Her voice was insistent, but she offered no more details. "She is *the* most amazing person I know."

As I spent more time with Ms. Bailey over the coming months, I found that most tenants were less suspicious of me than they'd been in the past. Sometimes, when a tenant came into Ms. Bailey's office to talk about a problem, the tenant would say, "It's okay, I don't mind if Sudhir listens."

Like J.T., Ms. Bailey seemed to enjoy the fact that I was interested in her. Perhaps she, too, thought I was going to be her personal biographer. I could see why she might make this assumption. I took every opportunity to express my fascination for her life, which seemed more fascinating the more I hung around.

One cold winter morning, I sat in Ms. Bailey's office with Catrina. It was a slow day, and only a few tenants visited. Ms. Bailey asked if I would go out and get her some coffee, and Catrina came with me. We bundled up and trudged through eight inches of fresh snow. The wind was nearly strong enough to blow you over; it was too cold for even a conversation. Catrina and I just concentrated on stepping in the footprints of people who'd made a first pass in the snow. Catrina wondered aloud what kind of God would make the earth so cold.

As we slogged our way back to the building, coffee and doughnuts in hand, a young woman hurried over to us as best as she could. "Catrina, you got to come quick," she said. "Ms. Bailey ran upstairs to Taneesha's apartment. She said you have to call Officer Reggie."

Catrina shoved the coffee at me and ran off as fast as possible

under the circumstances. Since tenants had a tough time getting the police to respond, Ms. Bailey summoned Officer Reggie, the cop who'd grown up in Robert Taylor, when the situation warranted.

"Where's Taneesha live?" I yelled.

The young woman who'd summoned Catrina shouted back over her shoulder, "Twelve-oh-four!"

Approaching the building, I encountered a couple of J.T.'s gang members. They wore brown work boots and thick down jackets with the Oakland Raiders' distinctive silver-and-black insignia. To me it seemed too cold for business, but I could see a steady stream of cars coming down the alley to buy drugs. White and black addicts jumped out of their cars and ran into the lobby to buy crack. As I walked inside, one of J.T.'s men shouted to me, "They're up on the twelfth. Elevator's broken."

The stairwells were brutally cold. I had to stop a few times to catch my breath. I came across quite a few other people, all of them upset by the broken elevators. "Merry fucking Christmas," one said to me bitterly as he passed by with a heavy laundry bag.

As I stepped into the gallery on the twelfth floor, I saw a group of men standing outside Apartment 1204. I recognized C-Note and a few other squatters among them. They were all moving about, trying to keep warm, some of them jumping up and down. The gallery floor was concrete, so even if you were wearing thick-soled shoes, the cold still shot up your legs.

The door of 1204 was partially open. Ms. Bailey stood over the sofa and, when she caught sight of me, beckoned me inside. I had met Taneesha a few times, most recently at her twenty-first birthday party, which J.T. had thrown. She was tall and very pretty, with long, straight black hair, and she was trying to make a career as a model. She currently modeled clothes at various nightclubs—so-called lingerie parties—and also went to college at night. She had a baby boy,

Justin, named for her favorite high-school teacher, who had encouraged her to pursue modeling.

Everyone suspected that J.T. was the baby's father. He had told me never to ask him about the baby.

The light in her apartment was dim, but bright enough to show that her face was beaten badly and her white T-shirt was stained with blood. Her breathing was labored, her eyes closed; you could hear the blood gurgling in her mouth. Another young woman held her hand and comforted her. "They're coming," she said, "the ambulance is coming. Just relax, 'Neesha."

Ms. Bailey pulled me aside and asked if I would drive Taneesha to the hospital.

"I don't have a car, Ms. Bailey," I said. "Didn't you call the ambulance?"

"Okay, then, do me a favor," she said. "Ask C-Note to tell the boys in the lobby to take her."

"What about the ambulance?"

"Oh, no, baby," Ms. Bailey said softly. "They never come."

I wasn't sure whether to believe her, but at least fifteen minutes had passed since I'd arrived and there was no ambulance. Provident Hospital was only two miles away.

I walked out to the gallery and told C-Note, who simply leaned over and yelled down to the street twelve floors below. "Cheetah! Yo, Cheetah! Ms. Bailey says bring the car 'round! You got to take her to the hospital!"

"C-Note!" Ms. Bailey shouted out. "Don't yell! He's still in the building. Damn, we can't have him leaving the building."

I was confused. *Whom didn't she want to leave the building?* Before I could ask, she rounded up the men and addressed them as if she were a general and they, however ragged, were her troops. "She got hurt pretty bad. She'll make it, but she don't look so good. I need

you-all to find him. He goes by 'Bee-Bee.' He may be in 407, inside that vacant apartment, or at his cousin's. I want to see him before you do anything to him."

I figured out that the man who had beat up Taneesha was hiding in the building.

"What if he starts to run or gets crazy?" one of the men asked. "Can we get him then?"

"Yeah, I suppose, but don't hurt him too bad before I talk to the fool. And *don't* let him get away. Sudhir, could you call J.T.?"

I nodded and followed C-Note and the others as they made for the stairwell. I recognized most of them as squatters who helped C-Note fix cars in the warmer months.

As soon as we were out of Ms. Bailey's earshot, I told C-Note I wanted to come with him.

"Call J.T.," he said, shaking his head. "Don't mess around with this. Do what Ms. Bailey says, *boy.*"

C-Note had called me "boy" only a few times, the last one when a friend of his was caught in a knife fight and C-Note instructed me to watch from inside a car, where I couldn't get hurt.

"I will, I will," I insisted. "But I want to go."

C-Note realized I wouldn't take no for an answer. "Just stay near me," he said. "But if shit gets crazy and I tell you to leave, you go, right? You hear me?"

Eight of us made our way down the stairwell, our breath leaving trails of hot steam in the frigid air. There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask. Who was Bee-Bee and what was his relationship with Taneesha? Did C-Note and the other men know him? But we were moving too fast, and C-Note was preoccupied, his eyes ablaze.

We stopped just above the fourth-floor stairwell, since it was thought that Bee-Bee had taken refuge in Number 407. "Charlie, you and Blue go ahead," C-Note said. "Shorty, you and them go to

the other stairwell in case he runs past. Sudhir and me will stay in the back. Charlie, I'm right behind you, so if he got a knife, just let him go. I'll get him."

It struck me that I might not be as far out of the way as I'd planned.

All the men hurried to their positions. I could see the door to Number 407 from where I stood in the stairwell with C-Note. Charlie and Blue approached it. Like C-Note, they wore secondhand clothes and ill-fitting shoes. Charlie had a crowbar in his hand. Blue's fist was clenched, but I couldn't tell what he was holding.

Charlie knocked. The thin wooden door gave a hollow sound. All the other apartments on the floor had thick steel doors, but the CHA used wooden doors to designate which apartments were vacant. "Yo, nigger!" Charlie called out. "Hey, Bee-Bee! Taneesha says she wants to talk with you. Come on out. She says she's cool with everything." He looked back at us. C-Note waved his hands, signaling him to shout again. "Yo, Bee-Bee! Taneesha says she just wants to talk, nigger! I'll take you up there." *Why would Bee-Bee need an escort to go back upstairs?* I thought. *And why on earth would he believe any of this?*

Just then a voice rang out from the stairwell above us. "He's on eleven, and he's coming down the stairs! Get him, he's coming down!"

C-Note instinctively pinned me against the gallery, letting Charlie and Blue go past. They stopped just inside the stairwell. C-Note and I crouched down a few feet behind them. The intense cold made me shiver. Charlie pressed his hand toward the floor a few times, motioning us to stand still. I had never heard the building so quiet. Apart from the wind and some cars in the distance, the only sound I could make out was a mouse or rat scratching around in the incinerator room.

Then, from above, I heard some distant footsteps turning into a

rumble. Someone was running down the stairs, breathing heavily. I found myself grabbing onto the back of C-Note's jacket. Charlie and Blue were crouched just in front of us. I made out what was in Blue's hand: brass knuckles.

Just as the footsteps reached the fourth floor, Charlie jumped up and swung the crowbar, waist high. He struck Bee-Bee full-on, bowling him over.

"Yeah, nigger!" Blue shouted, then jumped over and started pounding Bee-Bee in the side. His head hit the wall of the stairwell and snapped back. "Leave that bitch alone, you hear me?" Blue shouted, punching him repeatedly in the gut. "You better leave her alone, nigger!"

Bee-Bee was tall and strong, and he threw Charlie off him. He stood up and began shouting, but Blue tackled him, smashing Bee-Bee into the wall. The two of them started tumbling down the stairs. Charlie grabbed Bee-Bee's leg, so he, too, fell down the stairwell.

"Grab his other leg!" Charlie yelled in our direction. C-Note jumped down the stairs and made a grab. Blue, meanwhile, was struggling to get out from under Bee-Bee, who had Blue's head in a choke hold. I could see that Blue was struggling to breathe; he looked like he might pass out, or worse. I felt as if I had to do something. Running over to them, I kicked Bee-Bee in the stomach, which made him relax his grip on Blue. The other men smothered him, and I could hear his muffled words: "Okay, okay. All right, enough."

Blue, the strongest of them, bent Bee-Bee's arms behind his back, bringing him to his knees. I don't know whether it was the cold air, the adrenaline, or the swift kick I'd delivered, but I was badly out of breath. I leaned against the wall near the incinerator room. "Charlie, run back up the stairs and make sure he didn't drop nothing," C-Note said. "We'll meet you at the office."

The rest of us walked Bee-Bee downstairs to Ms. Bailey's office. She wasn't in, so C-Note sent another squatter to fetch her. We all stood outside the office, silent. No one seemed to worry that Bee-Bee would run away.

He sat down on the floor with his head pitched back, resting against the wall. This was my first opportunity to get a good look at him. He was young, his face light-skinned and boyish but with a menacing air. And he appeared to be aging fast. His nostrils were black, his eyes hollow and glazed, telltale signs of crack use. He wore a brown sweatshirt over a stained white tank top, with loose jeans and unlaced sneakers dirtied by the winter slush. I saw a gang tattoo on his neck, the crescent-and-star pattern of the Black P. Stone Nation. The Stones had been largely dismantled in the 1980s by the feds, with some remaining factions now aligned with the Black Kings. Why, I wondered, was Taneesha hanging around with *this* guy?

C-Note had caught his breath by now. "You really fucked up this time, Bee-Bee."

Bee-Bee said nothing. He wiped the sweat from his face.

I heard Ms. Bailey coming. I'd never seen her move so fast before—she was practically galloping, trailed by Catrina and a few older women in blue Tenant Patrol jackets.

Ms. Bailey hurried past without looking at me. Catrina, however, gave me one of her signature looks that I now recognized as meaning this: *Ms. Bailey's got the situation under control, and all will soon be right with the world.* Ms. Bailey unlocked her office door and went inside. Blue and Charlie, who'd returned from upstairs, picked up Bee-Bee and brought him into the office. Bee-Bee seemed cooperative. The three of them entered the back room in Ms. Bailey's office, and then someone shut the front door. I stayed outside, along with the other squatters and the Tenant Patrol women. C-Note, his work done, took off.

Then Catrina poked her head out the door and waved me inside. *Get in here!* she mouthed silently. I did, and she pointed me to a chair.

It was hard to make out the full conversation behind Ms. Bailey's closed door, but once in a while her voice was loud enough for me to hear: "You got some nerve, young man! . . . Beat her like that. . . . Where do you live, huh, where do you live?! . . . She's a good girl. She owe you money? She wouldn't fuck you? Why did you do that? . . . Say something!"

Then came the beating. Charlie or Blue, or maybe both of them, started hitting Bee-Bee. I also heard Ms. Bailey cry out in a muffled tone. *Maybe Ms. Bailey is hitting him as well,* I thought. I heard chairs scuffing the floor. Then, for the first time, I heard Bee-Bee's voice: "Oh, shit! . . . Get off me. . . . Fuck that! She deserved it."

Ms. Bailey started to yell louder. "Deserved it? . . . You'll get worse if you come around here. . . . Don't ever, don't *ever* touch her again, you hear me? *You hear me?* Don't ever come in this building again."

Ms. Bailey threw open the door. Blue dragged Bee-Bee out. His face was badly worked over; he was drooling and mumbling something unintelligible. Blue hustled him past Catrina and me and threw him to the floor on the gallery. Two other men grabbed him and led him toward the stairwell. Ms. Bailey followed them, with the members of the Tenant Patrol right behind.

I started to get up, but Catrina stopped me. "Sudhir! No, let them go! They're just taking him in the car, and they'll leave him on State Street. Come up with me and see how Taneesha's doing."

Taneesha's aunt answered our knock. She and Taneesha's mother told us that Taneesha was at the hospital; she had some bad bruises, but it seemed as if she'd be okay. "I don't know what she's going to

look like, though," said the aunt. "He beat her pretty good." Taneesha's mother promised to call Ms. Bailey later that night.

We went back downstairs to Ms. Bailey's office. She hadn't returned yet—she was apparently visiting Taneesha at the hospital—so Catrina told me what she knew. Bee-Bee had been managing Taneesha's modeling career, booking her at lingerie shows and dances. For this, he received a 25 percent cut—and, according to Catrina, he made Taneesha sleep with him. When Bee-Bee heard that Taneesha was going to sign up with a legitimate modeling agency, he got mad and started beating her. Today wasn't the first time this had happened. In fact, Ms. Bailey had repeatedly warned Bee-Bee to stop. But he kept harassing Taneesha, even stealing money from her apartment. It was only because Ms. Bailey felt there was no other recourse, Catrina explained, that today she had rounded up C-Note and the others to form a sort of militia. In the projects this was a long-standing practice. Militias were regularly put together to track down stolen property, mete out punishment, or simply obtain an apology for a victim.

In a neighborhood like this one, with poor police response and no shelter for abused women, the militias sometimes represented the best defense. "It's hard when you can't get nobody to come around," Catrina said solemnly. She was sitting in Ms. Bailey's chair, a soda in hand and her voice assured, seeming for all the world like the heiress to Ms. Bailey's throne. "No police, nobody from the hospital. We can't live like this! That's why Ms. Bailey is so important. And especially for women. She makes sure we're safe."

"I suppose," I said. "But it's a horrible way to live. And wouldn't you rather have the police come around?"

"I'd rather not live in the projects," Catrina shot back. "But women are always getting beat on, getting sent to the hospital. I

mean, you have to take care of yourself. Ms. Bailey makes these men take care of us. I don't see what's wrong with that. Unless you live here, you can't judge us, Sudhir."

For some reason I couldn't restrain the judgmental voice of my middle-class self. "You all didn't call the police, did you?" I blurted out.

For the first time since I knew Catrina, she couldn't look me in the eye. "No, we didn't."

"Why?"

She took a deep breath and raised her head. "Because we're scared of them."

"*You* are scared? *Women* are scared? *Everyone* is scared?" I asked. "Who *exactly* is scared? I hear this all the time."

"Everybody. But for women it's different. You wouldn't understand." She paused. "At least we have C-Note and the rest of them when things go crazy." It was clear that Catrina didn't want to talk further. I decided to ask Ms. Bailey about this when things calmed down.

I'd seen some police around the neighborhood, and I'd seen them work with Autry at the Boys & Girls Club. But since most tenants were so distrustful of the cops, I kept my interactions with them to a minimum, since I didn't want to be thought of as being "with" the cops.

Still, I had a hard time accepting the idea that tenants wouldn't call the police for something as serious as an assault. I also found it tough to believe that the police wouldn't show up—or, for that matter, that an ambulance wouldn't respond either. But as Catrina sat now in total silence, staring at me expressionlessly, I realized I might well be wrong.

I told her that I'd better get back to my apartment. She didn't acknowledge me. I wanted to do something to help her.

"Would you like to get something to eat?" I asked meekly.

She shook her head.

"Do you want to write me another essay?" I asked. "Do you want to write about what just happened?"

Catrina liked to write essays, which I read so that we could discuss them. This was a good way for her to talk through her aspirations as well as the shadows of her past: intense poverty and a bad family situation that I was just starting to learn about.

She shrugged. I couldn't tell if that meant yes or no.

"Well, I'm happy to read it if you do write something. Whenever."

"Thanks," she said. The barest hint of a smile came to her face, and she pushed her thick, black-framed glasses up on her nose. She started sniffling and reaching for a tissue. She looked no more than twelve years old. "I'll see you around," she said. "I'm sure things will be okay."

With Catrina having gone quiet and Ms. Bailey at the hospital and C-Note and the other squatters nowhere to be seen, there wasn't anyone left for me to talk with. I thought about visiting J.T., but every time I asked him anything about Ms. Bailey, he'd shut me down. "You want to know what she's like, *you* hang out with her," he said. "I ain't telling you shit." J.T. didn't care much for Ms. Bailey's authority, as it occasionally challenged his own. It was well within her power, for instance, to close off the lobby to his sales crew. J.T. wanted me to experience Ms. Bailey for myself to see what he had to deal with.

I took the bus back to my apartment but decided to stop first at Jimmy's, a local bar where a lot of U of C professors and students hung out. No one knew me there, and I could sit quietly and process

what had just happened in my fieldwork. Sometimes I would go there to write up my notes, but more often I just sat and stared blankly into my glass. With increasing frequency, Jimmy's was a ritual stop on my way home. At Jimmy's, as at the best bars, no one cared what troubles I brought to the table. Most of the people were sitting alone, like me, and I figured they were dealing with their own problems.

Jimmy's gave me a place to take off one hat (the fieldworker) and put on the other (the student). I needed this break, because I was starting to feel schizophrenic, as if I were one person in the projects—sometimes I caught myself even talking in a different way—and another back in Hyde Park.

Increasingly I found that I was angry at the entire field of social science—which meant, to some degree, that I was angry at myself. I resented the fact that the standard tools of sociologists seemed powerless to prevent the hardships I was seeing. The abstract social policies that my colleagues were developing to house, educate, and employ the poor seemed woefully out of touch. On the other hand, life in the projects was starting to seem too wild, too hard, and too chaotic for the staid prescriptions that social scientists could muster. It struck me as only partially helpful to convince youth to stay in school: what was the value in giving kids low-paying, menial jobs when they could probably be making more money on the streets?

In the poverty seminars that Bill Wilson sponsored, where some of the best academic minds congregated to discuss the latest research, I acted as if I had a unique insight into poverty by virtue of my proximity to families. I prefaced my questions by blurting out a self-serving objection: "No one here seems to have spent much time with the poor, but if you did, you would see that . . ." or, "If you actually

watched poor people instead of just reading census tables, you would understand that . . ." I felt as though the other scholars were living in a bubble, but my arrogant tone did little to help anyone hear what I was trying to say. I worried that my behavior might embarrass Wilson, but I was too bitter to take a moderate stance.

I wouldn't say that I was disillusioned with the academic life per se. I still attended classes, worked with professors and met my deadlines, earned pretty good grades, and even received a few prestigious fellowships. I still saw myself on the road to being a professor like Wilson. But day by day, it was getting harder to reconcile my life at the U of C with my life in the projects.

Rather than sharing my frustration with my girlfriend, my roommates, and my friends—most of whom were actually quite supportive and curious about my research—I just kept my experiences to myself. How could I explain the vigilante justice that C-Note and the others had just delivered? How could I explain my own role in the beating? I didn't understand it myself, and I feared that I'd open myself up to my friends' advice: *You need to call the police if they don't. . . . You're getting too involved. . . . You've gone too far. . . .*

When I did try talking about my fieldwork, I felt awkward. In fact, I sometimes came off as defending the gangs and their violent practices or as romanticizing the conditions in the projects. So, to stay sane, I'd usually just tell people about Autry's work at the Boys & Girls Club or, if pushed, a few stories about life in the gang.

I was growing quieter and more solitary. My fellow graduate students and even some faculty members thought of me as unapproachable. Rumors circulated that I was too ambitious, too aloof, but I figured I'd just have to live with them. A small part of me hoped that life would get back to normal once my fieldwork was over. But the end didn't seem very near, so I just kept to myself.

I was eager to know more about the incident with Bee-Bee. Why had Ms. Bailey sicced the squatters on him instead of leaving it to the police? *Had* the police been called—Catrina said they hadn't, but I wanted to be sure—and if so, why didn't they respond? What were the consequences for Ms. Bailey of taking such matters into her own hands?

I waited until "check day" to go see Ms. Bailey. That's when welfare checks were distributed, which meant that most tenants were out buying food and clothing and household items—and not, therefore, coming to Ms. Bailey with demands.

On the way up to her office, I stopped in to see J.T. He was lying on the sofa, watching TV. Ms. Mae gave me a big hug and told me to sit down for lunch. She had cooked some of my favorites—okra, greens, mac and cheese—and so I gladly obliged. J.T. quipped that I was eating his share of food. "You're becoming the little brother I never wanted," he said.

I told him about Ms. Bailey and the Bee-Bee incident. "Oh, man!" he said with a laugh. "That's why she's so upset. She keeps asking if I've seen you."

"Why's she upset at *me*?"

"Because you beat the shit out of that man, the one who beat Taneesha. I told you to be careful with Ms. Bailey, not to do things for her."

"First of all, I didn't do anything. Blue was choking, so I kicked the guy to help him."

"That's not *really* why she's upset." J.T. sat up. "She thinks that you were spying for us. Remember when I said that she doesn't use us as much anymore? We could've taken care of the man who did that, but she didn't ask us. She asked those fools, C-Note and those crackheads."

I knew that J.T. had tried to persuade Ms. Bailey to call him when a woman in the building got beat up. But I also knew, from Catrina, that Ms. Bailey wouldn't call J.T. because his gang members were known to physically and sexually abuse women.

By now J.T. was in lecture mode. "*That's* why I told you not to do things with her. Because I can't be there to protect you. She already knows that you're with me, so she doesn't trust you." According to this theory, Ms. Bailey must have thought I was spying for the gang, keeping track of how often she used non-gang affiliates for enforcing justice in the building.

I was taken aback when J.T. said that I was "with" him. I hadn't thought my relationship with J.T. would affect my work with Ms. Bailey—and I certainly wouldn't have predicted she would see me as a spy. His casual aside left me unsure of how to talk with different people in the projects. Once again I was being asked to pick sides. Was it possible, I wondered, to be in the projects for any length of time and remain neutral, an outsider, an objective observer?

J.T. urged me to go see Ms. Bailey immediately. "You might as well deal with this shit," he said. "It's not going away." He changed the channel.

As I headed for Ms. Bailey's office, I thought that I should probably just confess the truth: I hadn't asked her permission to join C-Note, and I had participated—however minimally—in the beating of Bee-Bee.

Catrina was leaving as I entered. She said nothing, just shook her head as if in disapproval. I stepped into Ms. Bailey's office. "Ms. Bailey, I have to apologize." I told her about my involvement with Bee-Bee.

She stared at me for a while. I fidgeted.

"That's not really what bothers me, Sudhir," she finally said. "What bothers me is that you are seeing things and you may not be ready for it."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"See, if you were in a war and you were a reporter, you could just say what's going on. No one would be mad at you. But this ain't a war. I try to tell you that all the time. It's *every day.* Every day something happens like what happened to 'Neesha. And you're getting yourself in the middle. People are saying, 'Sudhir's tough, he beat up that man almost by himself. He'll do things for us.' You understand why that's a problem?"

"I'm not sure. You think they'll hire me to beat up people?"

"They might, they might not. But they *will* start talking about you. Sometimes they'll give you credit, and sometimes they'll blame you. Understand?"

I didn't answer.

"And when you say, 'No, I can't help you with that,' they'll say, 'But you helped 'Neesha, so why won't you help me?' Then they'll say, 'Sudhir don't care about *us,*' or 'Sudhir is 'Neesha's manager.' Then they'll say, 'Sudhir is working for Ms. Bailey, and he don't do nothing unless he gets paid.' Get it?"

"I think I get it." I sat silently and stared into my hands. "When do you think I *should* see these things?"

"Well, *why* do you want to see what we do? I mean, why don't you hang around the police? You should figure out why they don't come."

"Ms. Bailey, I wanted to ask you about that. Did you really call the police? Or the ambulance?"

"Sudhir, the hardest thing for middle-class white folk to understand is why those people don't come when we call."

Ms. Bailey didn't think I was actually white, but she always tried to show me how my middle-class background got in the way of understanding life in the projects.

"They just don't come around all the time. And so we have to

find ways to deal with it. I'm not sure how much better I can explain it to you. Why don't you watch out for the next few months? See how much they come around."

"What about Officer Reggie?"

"Yes, he's a friend. But can I tell you how he can be helpful? Not by coming and putting Bee-Bee in jail. Because he'll be out in the morning. But Officer Reggie *can* visit Bee-Bee after we're through with him. Maybe put the fear in him."

"Put the fear in him? I don't understand."

"He could visit Bee-Bee and tell him that we won't be so nice the next time he does that to 'Neesha. If Bee-Bee knows that the cop don't care if we kick his ass, that may make him think twice. *That* is what we need Officer Reggie for."

"Ms. Bailey, I have to tell you that I just don't get it. I've been watching you for a while, and it just seems to me that you shouldn't have to be doing everything you're doing. If you got the help you needed, you wouldn't have to act like this."

"Sudhir, what's the first thing I told you when you asked about my job?"

I smiled as I thought of something she'd told me months earlier: "As long as I'm helping people, something ain't right about this community. When they don't need me no more, that's when I know they're okay."

But she'd been helping for three decades and didn't see any end in sight.

One day in the middle of February, the Wilson family lost their front door. The Wilsons lived on the twelfth floor, just down the hall from Ms. Bailey. Their door simply fell off its hinges, leaving the family exposed to the brutal cold of a Chicago winter.

Even *with* a front door, the Robert Taylor Homes weren't very ıfortable in the winter. Because the galleries are outdoors, you can ctically get blown over by the lake wind as you walk from the el- tor to your apartment. Inside, the winter wind inevitably finds its r through the seams in the doorframe.

Chris Wilson worked for the city and moved in and out of bert Taylor, living off-the-lease with his wife, Mari, and her six dren. Chris and Mari were, unsurprisingly, pretty anxious when y lost their door. It wasn't just the cold; they were worried about ıg robbed. It was common knowledge that drug addicts would ınce on any opportunity to steal a TV or anything else of value.

The Wilsons tried calling the CHA but got no response. They up a makeshift door of wooden planks and plastic sheeting, but idn't keep out the cold. Neighbors who said they'd keep an eye the apartment didn't show up reliably. So after a few days, the lsons called Ms. Bailey.

Ms. Bailey leaped into action. She asked J.T. to station a few of gang members in the twelfth-floor stairwells to keep out poten- burglars. As a preventive measure, J.T. also shut down a nearby ant apartment that was being used as a crack den. Then Ms. Bai- contacted two people she knew at the CHA. The first was a man o obtained a voucher so the Wilsons could stay at an inexpensive tel until their door was fixed. The second person was able to ed up the requisition process for obtaining a new door. It arrived ı days after Ms. Bailey placed her first call.

The door didn't come cheap for the Wilsons. They had to pay . Bailey several hundred dollars, which covered the fees that she d to her CHA friends, as well as an electrician's bill, since some the wiring in the Wilsons' apartment went bad because of the d. Ms. Bailey presumably pocketed the rest of the money. Mari lson was, on balance, unperturbed. "Last summer we didn't have

running water for a month," she told me, "so one week without a door was nothing."

Having watched Ms. Bailey help women like Taneesha and families like the Wilsons, I was left with deeply mixed feelings about her methodology—often ingenious and just as often morally questionable. With such scarce resources available, I understood why she believed that the ends justified the means. But collaborating with gangs, bribing officials for services, and redistributing drug money did little to help the typical family in her building. Ms. Bailey had told me that she would much rather play by the rules if only the rules worked. But in the end I concluded that what really drove Ms. Bailey was a thirst for power. She liked the fact she could get things done (and get paid for it), and she wasn't about to give that up, even if it meant that sometimes her families might get short shrift. Many families, meanwhile, were too scared to challenge her and invite the consequences of her wrath.

I was left discouraged by the sort of power bestowed upon building presidents like Ms. Bailey. People in this community shouldn't have to wait more than a week to get a new front door. People in this community shouldn't have to wonder if the ambulance or police would bother responding. People in this community shouldn't have to pay a go-between like Ms. Bailey to get the services that most Americans barely bother to think about. No one in the suburb where I grew up would tolerate such inconvenience and neglect.

But life in the projects wasn't like my life in the suburbs. Not only was it harder, but it was utterly unpredictable, which necessitated a different set of rules for getting by. And living in a building with a powerful tenant leader, as hard as that life could be, was slightly less hard. It may have cost a little more to get what you needed, but at least you had a chance.

SIX

The Hustler and the Hustled

Four years deep into my research, it came to my attention that I might get into a lot of trouble if I kept doing what I'd been doing.

During a casual conversation with a couple of my professors, in which I apprised them of how J.T.'s gang went about planning a drive-by shooting—they often sent a young woman to surreptitiously cozy up to the rival gang and learn enough information to prepare a surprise attack—my professors duly apprised *me* that I needed to consult a lawyer. Apparently the research I was doing lay a bit out of bounds of the typical academic research.

Bill Wilson told me to stop visiting the projects until I got some legal advice. I tried to convince Wilson to let me at least hang out around the Boys & Girls Club, but he shot me a look indicating that his position was not negotiable.

I did see a lawyer, and I learned a few important things.

First, if I became aware of a plan to physically harm somebody,

was obliged to tell the police. Meaning I could no longer watch he gang plan a drive-by shooting, although I could speak with them bout drive-bys in the abstract.

Second, there was no such thing as "researcher-client confiden-ality," akin to the privilege conferred upon lawyers, doctors, or riests. This meant that if I were ever subpoenaed to testify against ie gang, I would be legally obligated to participate. If I withheld in-ormation, I could be cited for contempt. While some states offer so-alled shield laws that allow journalists to protect their confidential ources, no such protection exists for academic researchers.

It wasn't as if I had any intention of joining the gang in an ac-ial drive-by shooting (nor would they ever invite me). But since I ould get in trouble just for driving around with them while they *lked* about shooting somebody, I had to rethink my approach. I ould especially have to be clearer with J.T. We had spoken several mes about my involvement; when I was gang leader for a day, for istance, he knew my limits and I understood his. But now I would eed to tell him, and perhaps a few others, about the fact that I was gally obligated to share my notes if I was ever subpoenaed.

This legal advice was ultimately helpful in that it led me to se-ously take stock of my research. It was getting to be time for me start thinking about the next stage: writing up my notes into a dis-rtation. I had become so involved in the daily drama of tagging ong with Ms. Bailey and J.T. that I'd nearly abandoned my study the broader underground economy my professors wanted to be e backbone of my research.

So I returned to Robert Taylor armed with two objectives: let :ople know about my legal issues and glean more details of the ten-its' illegal economic activities.

I figured that most people would balk at revealing the econom-s of hustling, but when I presented the idea to J.T., Ms. Bailey, and

several others, nearly everyone agreed to cooperate. Most of the hustlers liked being taken seriously as businesspeople—and, it should be said, they were eager to know if they earned more than their competitors. I emphasized that I wouldn't be able to share the details of anyone else's business, but most people just shrugged off my caveat as a technicality that could be gotten around.

So with the blessing of J.T. and Ms. Bailey, I began devoting my time to interviewing the local hustlers: candy sellers, pimps and prostitutes, tailors, psychics, squeegee men.

I also told J.T. and Ms. Bailey about my second problem, my legal obligation to share notes with the police.

"You mean you didn't know this all along?" Ms. Bailey said. "Even *I* knew that you have to tell police what you're doing—unless you give them information on the sly."

"Oh, no!" I protested. "I'm not going to be an informant."

"Sweetheart, we're all informants around here. Nothing to be ashamed of. Just make sure that you get what you need, I always say. And don't let them beat you up."

"I'm not sharing my data with them—that's what I mean."

"You mean you'll go to prison?"

"Well, not exactly. I just mean I won't share my data with them."

"Do you know what being in contempt means?"

When I didn't reply, Ms. Bailey shook her head in disgust. I had seen this look before: she was wondering how I had qualified for higher education given my lack of street smarts.

"Any nigger around here can tell you that you got two choices," she said. "Tell them what they want or sit in Cook County Jail."

I was silent, trying to think of a third option.

"I'll ask you again," she said. "Will you give up your information, or will you agree to go to jail?"

"You need to know that? That's important to you?"

"Sudhir, let me explain something to you. You think we were ·orn yesterday around here. Haven't we had this conversation a hun-red times? You think we don't know what you do? You think ve don't know that you keep all your notebooks in Ms. Mae's partment?"

I shuddered. Ms. Mae had made me feel so comfortable in her partment that I'd never even entertained the possibility that some-ne like Ms. Bailey would think about—and perhaps even page rough—my notebooks.

"So why let me hang out?" I asked.

"Why do you *want* to hang out?"

"I suppose I'm learning. That's what I do, study the poor."

"Okay, well, you want to act like a saint, then you go ahead," ls. Bailey said, laughing. "Of course you're learning! But you e also *hustling.* And we're all hustlers. So when we see another one ; us, we gravitate toward them. Because we need other hustlers survive."

"You mean that people think I can do something for them if they lk to me?"

"They *know* you can do something for them!" she yelped, lean-g across the table and practically spitting out her words. "And they ow you *will,* because you need to get your information. You're a stler, I can see it. You'll do anything to get what you want. Just n't be ashamed of it."

I tried to turn the conversation back to the narrow legal issue, t Ms. Bailey kept on lecturing me.

"I'll be honest with you," she said, sitting back in her chair. "If u *do* tell the police, everyone here will find you and beat the shit t of you. So that's why we know you won't tell nobody." She iled as if she'd won the battle.

So who should I be worried about? I wondered. *The police or Ms. Bailey and the tenants?*

When I told J.T. about my legal concerns, he looked at me with some surprise. "I could've told you all that!" he said. "Listen, I'm never going to tell you anything that's going to land me in jail—or get me killed. So it don't bother me what you write down, because I can take care of myself. But that's really not what you should be worried about."

I waited.

"What you should be asking yourself is this: 'Am I going to be on the side of black folks or the cops?' Once you decide, you'll do whatever it takes. You understand?"

I didn't.

"Let me try again. Either you're with us—you feel like you're in this with us and you respect that—or you're just here to look around. So far these niggers can tell that you've been with us. You come back every day. Just don't change, and nothing will go wrong, at least not around here."

J.T.'s advice seemed vague and a bit too philosophical. Ms. Bailey's warning—that I would get beat up if I betrayed confidences—made more sense. But maybe J.T. was saying the same thing, in his own way.

I decided to focus my study of the underground economy on the three high-rise buildings that formed the core of J.T.'s territory. I already knew quite a bit—that squatters fixed cars in the alleys, people sold meals out of their homes, and prostitutes took clients to vacant apartments—but I had never asked people how much money they made, what kind of expenses they incurred, and so on.

J.T. was far more enthusiastic about my project than I'd imagined he would be, although I couldn't figure out why.

"I have a great idea," he told me one day. "I think you should talk to all the pimps. Then you can go to all the whores. Then I'll let you talk to all the people stealing cars. Oh, yeah! And you also have folks selling stolen stuff. I mean, there's a whole bunch of people you can talk to about selling shoes or shirts! And I'll make sure they cooperate with you. Don't worry, they won't say no."

"Well, we don't want to force anyone to talk to me," I said, even though I was excited about meeting all these people. "I can't *make* anyone talk to me."

"I know," J.T. said, breaking into a smile. "But *I* can."

I laughed. "No, you can't do that. That's what I'm saying. That wouldn't be good for my research."

"Fine, fine," he said. "I'll do it, but I won't tell you."

J.T. arranged for me to start interviewing the pimps. He explained that he taxed all the pimps working in or around his buildings: some paid a flat fee, others paid a percentage of their take, and all paid in kind by providing women to J.T.'s members at no cost. The pimps had to pay extra, of course, if they used a vacant apartment as a brothel; they even paid a fee to use the stairwells or a parking lot.

As I began interviewing the pimps, I also befriended some of the freelance prostitutes like Clarisse who lived and worked in the building. "Oh, my ladies will love the attention," Clarisse said when I asked for help in talking to these women. Within two weeks I had interviewed more than twenty of them.

Between these conversations and my interviews with the pimps, some distinctions began to emerge. The prostitutes who were managed by pimps (these women were known as "affiliates") had some clear advantages over the "independents" who worked for themselves. The typical affiliate was beaten up far less frequently—about once a year, as against roughly four times a year for the independents. The affiliates also earned about twenty dollars per week more than the independents, even though their pimps took a 33 percent cut. (Twenty dollars wasn't a small sum, considering that the average Robert Taylor prostitute earned only about one hundred dollars per week.) And I never heard of an affiliate being killed in the line of work, whereas in one recent two-year stretch three independents were killed.

But the two types of prostitutes had much in common. Both groups had high rates of heroin and crack use, and they were bound to the projects, where the demand for sex came mostly from low-income customers. At the truck stops on the other side of the Dan Ryan Expressway—barely a mile away from Robert Taylor but a different ecosystem entirely—a different set of pimps catered to a clientele of white truckers who paid more than the typical black customer in a housing project. Around Robert Taylor a prostitute usually earned ten to twenty dollars for oral sex, sometimes as little as twenty-five dollars for intercourse, and at least fifty dollars for anal sex. But if she was in need of drugs, she would drop her price significantly or accept a few bags of drugs in lieu of any cash.

Once my prostitute research was under way, I asked Ms. Bailey if she would help me meet female hustlers who sold something other than sex. I had casual knowledge of any number of off-the-books businesses: women who sold food out of their apartments or catered parties; women who made clothing, offered marital counseling or baby-sitting; women who read horoscopes, styled hair, prepared taxes, drove gypsy cabs, and sold anything from candy to used appliances to stolen goods. But since most of these activities were conducted out of public view, I needed Ms. Bailey to open some doors.

She was cautious. For the first week, she selectively introduced ne to a few women but refused to let me meet others. I'd suggest a ıame, and she'd mull it over. "Well," she'd say, "let me think about vhether I want you to meet with her." Or, just as often, "No, she's ıot good. But I got someone else for you." Once, after Ms. Bailey ntroduced me to a psychic, I asked if many other psychics worked n the building. "Maybe, maybe," she said, then changed the subject ınd left the room.

I eventually figured out why she was reluctant to let me explore he underground economy. As it turned out, tenant leaders like Ms. Bailey always got their cut from such activities. If you sold food out of your kitchen or took in other people's children to baby-sit, you'd ıetter give Ms. Bailey a few dollars, or you might find a CHA manger knocking on your door. If you occasionally cut hair in your partment, it was probably a good idea to give Ms. Bailey a free tyling once in a while. In these parts Ms. Bailey was like the local RS—and probably a whole lot more successful at collecting her due.

So the people she let me talk to were the ones she probably rusted most not to speak out of line. But I didn't have much choice: Vithout Ms. Bailey's say-so, *no one* was going to speak with me bout any illegal activities.

Truth be told, nearly everyone Ms. Bailey introduced me to had fascinating story to tell. One of the most fascinating women I met vas Cordella Levy, a close friend of Ms. Bailey. She was sixty-three ears old and had lived in public housing her entire life, the past thirty ears in Robert Taylor. (She had a Jewish surname, she said, because er grandmother had married a Jewish man; someone else in her ımily, however, told me that they were descended from black Herew Israelites.) Cordella had raised seven children, all but one of vhom had moved out of Robert Taylor. Although she used a walk-

ing crutch to get around, Cordella had the fight of a bulldog inside her.

She now ran a small candy store inside her apartment. All day long she sat on a stool by the door and waited for children to stop by. Her living room was barren except for the candy: boxes and boxes of lollipops, gum, and candy bars stacked invitingly on a few tables. If you peeked around the corner, you could see into the back bedroom, where Cordella had a TV, couches, and so on. But she liked to keep her candy room sparse, she told me, because if customers saw her furniture, they might decide to come back and rob her.

"You know," she told me, "I didn't always sell candy."

"You mean you didn't go to school for this?" I joked.

"Sweetheart, I never made it past the fourth grade. Black folks weren't really allowed to go to school in the South. What I meant was that I used to be somebody different. Ms. Bailey didn't tell you?" I shook my head. "She told me you wanted to know how I used to hustle."

"I'd love to hear," I said. Cordella seemed itching to tell her story.

"Sweetheart, I've made money around here every which way you can. You know, I started out working for Ms. Bailey's mother, Ella Bailey. Ella was a madam, used to have parties in the building. Oh, Lord! She could throw a party!"

"Ms. Bailey's mother was a madam?" I laughed. "That explains a lot!"

"Yes, sir, and when she passed, I took over from her. Three apartments on the fourteenth floor. Cordella's Place, they used to call it. Come in for a drink, play some cards, make a friend, have a nice time."

"Make a friend? Is that what they used to call it?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with friendship. And then I started making clothes, and then I sold some food, drove people around for a

while to the store. My mother taught me how to sew wedding dresses, so I was doing a lot of—"

"Wait!" I said. "Slow down, please. Let's get back to helping people make friends. I'm curious why you stopped running the parties. What happened? I ask because all the people doing that today are men: J.T. and the pimps. I haven't heard about any women."

"That's because they took over. The men ruined everything for us. The first one was J.T.'s mama's cousin, Miss Mae's cousin. He just decided to start harassing all the women who were making money. I think it was around 1981. He would beat us up if we didn't pay him money to work out of the building. I had to pay him a few dollars each week to manage my women and throw my parties. He nearly killed my friend because she wouldn't give him money for doing hairstyling in her apartment. He was real awful. On heroin, used to carry around a big gun, like he was in the movies. And he was a very violent man."

"So what happened, he took over your parties?"

"Well, all of a sudden, he told me I had to give him fifty percent of what I was making, and he'd protect me—keep the cops away. But I knew he couldn't keep any cops away. The man was a thug and wasn't even no good at that. I figured I had been doing it for a while, and so I just gave up and let him have the whole thing. But what I'm saying is that the women ran things around here, before the gangs and the rest of them took over. It was different, because we also helped people."

"How?"

"See, people like me had a little power. I could get your apartment fixed or get you out of jail, because the cops were my best customers. These folks today, like J.T., they can't do that."

"What about Ms. Bailey?"

"Yeah, she can, but she's just one person. Imagine if you had

about fifty people like her doing their thing! Now, that was a sight. Fifty women, all powerful women with no shame. It was a different time. It was a time for women, a place for women."

For several days after I interviewed Cordella, I kept thinking of what she said: "It was a time for women, a place for women." Her nostalgia reminded me of how Catrina, Ms. Bailey's assistant, spoke so reverently of women helping each other in the building.

I spent the next three months focused on meeting the matriarchs of the high-rises. There were plenty to choose from: more than 90 percent of the four thousand households in Robert Taylor were headed by a female. Whenever Ms. Bailey introduced me to an elderly dressmaker or a grandmother who offered day care to working parents, I tried to solicit stories about the past as well as details of her current enterprise.

Many of these women had protested for civil rights in the 1960s and campaigned for black political candidates in the 1970s; they took the need to fight for their community very seriously. But during the 1980s and 1990s, as their plight was worsened by gangs, drugs, and even deeper poverty, they struggled just to keep their families together. By then the housing authority had grown corrupt and unsupportive, the police were largely unresponsive, and the tribe of strong women had been severely marginalized.

While the official statistics said that 96 percent of Robert Taylor's adult population was unemployed, many tenants did have part-time legitimate jobs—as restaurant workers, cabdrivers, cleaning ladies in downtown corporate offices, and nannies to middle-class families. But nearly all of them tried to hide any legitimate income from the CHA, lest they lose their lease or other welfare benefits.

There were also working men living in Robert Taylor, perhaps a few dozen in each building. But they stayed largely out of sight, again because of the CHA limits on how much money a tenant family could earn. Sometimes a man would leave home for a few weeks just to keep the CHA inspectors off guard. So when I or someone else they didn't recognize came into an apartment, the men might head for the back room. They didn't attend many tenant meetings, and for the most part they let the women handle the battle for better living conditions. The absence of men in Robert Taylor had made it that much easier for the gang members and pimps to essentially have the run of the place.

As I began compiling statistics on the illicit earnings generated by women throughout Robert Taylor, it became obvious that all their illicit earnings combined hardly constituted a lucrative economy. Selling food or candy out of your apartment might net you about twenty dollars per week. (Cordella Levy managed to do better than that, having persuaded a local grocery store to sell her candy wholesale in return for steering her customers to that store for their groceries.) Day care brought in five or ten dollars per day per child, but business wasn't steady. A woman could earn more selling sex, but that was risky in a few ways. One of the favored moneymaking options, therefore, was to take in a boarder, which could generate a hundred dollars a month. There was never any shortage of people who needed a place to stay.

But I also discovered something more interesting, and probably more important, than the money that changed hands in these various transactions. Many households participated in a vast web of exchange in which women borrowed, bartered, and pooled their resources to survive. One woman might offer day care for a large group of women, another might have a car and contribute by driving folks to buy groceries, and other women might take turns cooking for various families. In some cases the members of a network maintained a fixed formula of exchange: If you cook my family five dinners, I'll take care of your kids for two days.

Often a network of women would share their apartments as well. Let's say there were five women on one floor whose apartments had maintenance problems (which, given the condition of the buildings, wasn't uncommon). There was little chance that the CHA would respond to all their repair requests, and the women couldn't afford to pay five different bribes to Ms. Bailey or the CHA building manager. These women would pool their money to make sure they *could* pay the necessary bribes so that at least one apartment in their network had hot water and at least two had working refrigerators and stoves; perhaps one of them would also pay for pirated cable TV. Everyone would shower in one apartment, cook in another apartment, keep their food elsewhere, sit in the one air-conditioned room to watch the one TV with cable, and so on. To have your own apartment with all utilities functioning was a luxury that few people expected in Robert Taylor.

I met most of the neighborhood's male hustlers by hanging out in the local parking lot with C-Note. He let people know that it was safe to speak with me. There were always a lot of men milling around, talking and drinking, who represented the diversity of the neighborhood hustlers: carpenters who did inexpensive home repairs, freelance preachers, truck drivers who worked off the books for local factories, car thieves, rappers and musicians, cooks and cleaners. All of them made their money under the table.

Most of them had once held legitimate jobs that they lost out of either misfortune or misbehavior. Until a few years earlier, they could have gotten a few hundred dollars a month in welfare money, but by

1990, Illinois and many other states eliminated such aid for adult men. The conservative revolution launched by President Ronald Reagan would lead eventually to a complete welfare overhaul, culminating in the 1996 directive by President Bill Clinton that made welfare a temporary program by setting time limits on just about every form of public aid—for men, women, and children.

For men like the ones in Robert Taylor, the welfare changes only exacerbated their poverty. They all learned to keep track of which restaurants and churches offered free food and which abandoned buildings were available for sleeping. Like the women, the men also had a network: One would cook while another looked for work while yet another tried to find a place for all of them to sleep. If they heard of a vacant apartment, they'd pool their resources to bribe the CHA building manager, gang leader, tenant leader, or whoever else happened to have the key. These men also passed along information to cops in exchange for "get out of jail free" promises, and they could always make a few dollars from CHA janitors—who regularly paid off hustlers to clean the buildings when they felt like taking a day off.

C-Note introduced me to Porter Harris, a bone-thin man, sixty-five years old, who spent much of his time scouring the South Side for recyclable junk. When I met him, he was pushing a shopping cart filled with wire, cans, and metal scrap, trolling the tall grass between the high-rises and the railroad tracks. Years ago, Porter told me, *he* was the one who dictated where various hustlers in Robert Taylor could work, sell, and trade, much as C-Note did now. But he'd had to leave because of a battle with a gang leader.

"Booty Caldwell, real name was Carter," he told me in a southern drawl. "That was the one who kicked me out of here for good." Porter picked at his few remaining teeth with a blade of grass. He wore a floppy straw hat that made him look as if he'd stepped out

of a faded photograph from the Old South. "There were about ten of us. I controlled Forty-seventh Street to Fifty-first. I had this whole area—you couldn't sell your *soul* without letting me know about it, yessir."

"Sounds like a good living," I said, smiling. "You were the king of hustlers?"

"Lord, king, and chief. Call it what you want, I ran that area. And then one day it all was taken away. By Booty Caldwell. He was part of the El Rukn gang." By the late 1960s, El Rukn had become the most powerful gang in Chicago. They were widely credited with uniting many independent gangs, making peace treaties and cooperative arrangements that resulted in a few El Rukn "supergangs." But a federal indictment in the mid-1980s weakened El Rukn, allowing other gangs, including the Black Kings, to take over the burgeoning crack trade.

From Porter, C-Note, and others, I learned that the most profitable hustling jobs for men were in manual labor: you could earn five hundred dollars a month fixing cars in a parking lot or roughly three hundred dollars a month cleaning up at the local schools. The worst-paying jobs, meanwhile, often required the longest hours: gathering up scrap metal or aluminum (a hundred dollars a month) or selling stolen clothes or cigarettes (about seventy-five dollars a month). While just about every hustler I interviewed told me that he was hoping for a legit job and a better life, I rarely saw anyone get out of the hustling racket unless he died or went to jail.

One day, after I'd spent hours interviewing Porter and some of the other male hustlers, I was summoned to Ms. Bailey's office. I'd been so busy that I hadn't seen her in a while. It was probably a good idea, I thought, to have a catch-up session.

I said hello to Catrina on my way in, and she gave me a smile. She was assuming more and more duties and seemed to be acting nearly as a junior officer to Ms. Bailey. Inside, J.T. and Ms. Bailey were laughing together and greeted me heartily.

"Mr. Professor!" J.T. said. "My mother says you haven't been by in a month! What, you don't like us anymore? You found somebody who cooks better?"

"You better not piss off Ms. Mae," Ms. Bailey said. "You'll never be able to come back in the building again."

"Sorry, all this interviewing has kept me really busy," I said, exasperated. "I just haven't had time to do much of anything else."

"Well, then, sit down, baby," Ms. Bailey said. "We won't keep you long. We just wanted to know who you've been meeting. We're curious about what you've learned."

"Hey, you know what, I could actually use the chance to tell you what I've been finding," I said, taking out my notebooks. "I've been meeting so many people, and I can't be sure whether they're telling me the truth about how much they earn. I suppose I want to know whether I'm really understanding what it's like to hustle around here."

"Sure," J.T. said. "We were just talking about that. You used to ask us to find you people. Now you do it yourself. We feel like you don't need us no more." He started laughing, and so did Ms. Bailey.

"Yeah," Ms. Bailey said. "Don't leave us behind, Mr. Professor, when you start to be successful! Go ahead, tell me who you've been talking to. If you tell us who you met and what they're doing, maybe we can check for you and see if folks are being straight."

For the next three hours, I went through my notebooks and told them what I'd learned about dozens of hustlers, male and female. There was Bird, the guy who sold license plates, Social Security cards, and small appliances out of his van. Doritha the tax preparer.

Candy, one of the only female carpenters in the neighborhood. Prince, the man who could pirate gas and electricity for your apartment. J.T. and Ms. Bailey rarely seemed surprised, although every now and then one of them perked up when I mentioned a particularly enterprising hustler or a woman who had recently started taking in boarders.

I finally left, riding the bus home to my apartment. I was grateful for having had the opportunity to discuss my findings with two of the neighborhood's most formidable power brokers. As I looked out the bus windows, I realized just how much I owed Ms. Bailey and J.T. If it weren't for the two of them, and a few other people like C-Note and Autry, I wouldn't ever have made any progress in learning how things really worked around Robert Taylor.

I spent the next few weeks turning the information in my notebooks into statistical tables and graphs that showed how much different hustlers made. I figured that J.T. would appreciate this data at least as much as my professors would, since he was always talking about the importance of data analysis within his managerial technique. So I headed over to Robert Taylor to show him my research.

In the parking lot, I ran into C-Note, who was in his usual spot with a few other squatters, fixing flat tires and washing cars.

"Hey, what's up, guys?" I shouted out. "Long time—how you been?"

Nobody replied. They looked at me, then turned away. I walked closer and stood a few feet from them. "What's up?" I said. "Everything all right?"

One of the men, Pootie, picked up a tool and started to loosen a tire from the rim. "Man, sometimes you just learn the hard way," he said to no one in particular. "That's life, isn't it? Sometimes you

realize you can't trust nobody. They could be a cop, a snitch—who knows?"

C-Note simply shrugged. "Mm-hmm," he said.

"Yup, you just learn you can't trust *nobody,*" Pootie continued. "You tell them something, and then they turn on you. Just like *that*! You can't predict it. Especially if they're not from around here."

Once again C-Note shrugged. "Mm-hmm," he muttered. "You got that right."

They kept ignoring me, so I walked over to J.T.'s building. A young woman I knew named Keisha was standing on the grass with her kids. They looked like they were waiting for a ride.

"Hey, Keisha," I said. "How are you doing?"

"How am I *doing*?" she asked, shaking her head. "I was doing a lot better before I started talking to *you*." She picked up her things and walked her kids a few yards away.

In the lobby some of J.T.'s gang members were hanging out. We shook hands and said hello. I went upstairs to see Ms. Bailey and J.T., but neither of them was home.

Down in the lobby again, I could feel people staring at me, but I couldn't figure out why. I felt myself growing paranoid. Did people suddenly think I was a cop? What was up with Pootie, C-Note, and Keisha? I decided to go back home.

I spent a few days trying to track down J.T., but nobody knew where he was. I couldn't wait any longer, so I went back to Robert Taylor and found C-Note in the parking lot. He and two other men were working on a car.

"C-Note, please," I begged, "what did I do? Tell me."

C-Note stood up and wiped the oil off a wrench. He motioned for the two other men to leave us alone. One of them gave me a

nasty look and muttered something that sounded equally nasty, but I couldn't quite make it out.

"You need to learn to shut your mouth," C-Note finally said.

"Shut my mouth? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play with me. All that shit I told you. All them niggers I introduced you to. If you told me you were going to tell J.T. they were making that money, I wouldn't have told you nothing."

My heart sank. I thought of my long debriefing with J.T. and Ms. Bailey. I had given them breakdowns on each hustler's earnings: how much every one of them made, when and where they worked, what they planned for the future. I didn't hand over my written data, but I'd done the next-best thing.

"J.T. is all *over* these niggers," C-Note said. He looked disgusted and spit on the ground. I could tell he was angry but that he wasn't comfortable expressing it to me. Until now our relationship had been based on trust; I rarely, if ever, spoke to anyone about what I learned from C-Note.

"He's taxing every one of them now," he said. "And he beat the shit out of Parnell and his brother because he thought they were hiding what they were doing. They weren't, but you can't convince J.T. of nothing. When he gets his mind to something, that's it. And then he tells Jo-Jo and his guys that they can't come around no more because *they* were hiding things from him. Jo-Jo's daughter lives up in here. So now he can't see *her*." C-Note kept talking, getting angrier and angrier as he listed all the people that J.T. was cracking down on. "There's no way he could've found out if you didn't say nothing."

There was an awkward silence. I thought about lying, and I began to drum up an excuse. But something came over me. During the years I'd been in this community, people were always telling me that I was different from all the journalists and other outsiders who came

by, hunting up stories. They didn't eat dinner with families or hang around at night to share a beer; they typically asked a lot of questions and then left with their story, never to return. I prided myself on this difference.

But now it was time to accept my fate. "I was sitting in Ms. Bailey's office," I told C-Note. "She and J.T. always help me, just like you. And I fucked up. I told them things, and I had no idea that they would use that information. Man, I had no idea that it would even be useful to them."

"That has to be one of the stupidest things I *ever* heard you say." C-Note began putting away his tools.

"Honestly, C-Note, I had no idea when I was talking to them—"

"No!" C-Note's voice grew sharp. "You knew. Yes you did. But you were too busy thinking about your own self. That's what happened. You got some shit for your professors, and you were getting high on that. I know you ain't *that* naïve, man."

"I'm sorry, C-Note. I don't know what else to say. I fucked up."

"Yeah, you fucked up. You need to think about *why* you're doing your work. You always tell me you want to help us. Well, we ain't never asked for your help, and we sure don't need it now."

C-Note walked away toward the other men. They stood quietly drinking beer and watching me. I headed toward the building. I wanted to see if Ms. Bailey was in her office.

Then an obvious thought hit me: If J.T. had acted on my information to tax the male street hustlers, Ms. Bailey might have started taxing the women I told her about. Worse yet, she might have had some of them evicted for hiding their income. How could I find out what had happened because of my stupidity? As I stood in the grassy expanse, staring up at the high-rise, I tried to think of someone who might possibly help me. I needed a tenant who was relatively independent of Ms. Bailey, someone who might still trust me enough to talk. I thought of Clarisse.

I hustled over to the liquor store and bought a few bottles of Boone's Farm wine. Clarisse wasn't going to talk for free.

I walked quickly through the building lobby and took the stairs up. I didn't want to get trapped in the elevator with women who might be angry with me for selling them out to Ms. Bailey. Clarisse opened her door and greeted me with a loud burst of laughter.

"Oooh! Boy, you fucked up this time, you surely did."

"So it's all over the building? Everyone knows?"

"Sweetheart, ain't no secrets in this place. What did Clarisse tell you when we first met? *Shut the fuck up.* Don't tell them nothing about who you are and what you do. Clarisse should have been there with you. You were spying for Ms. Bailey?"

"Spying! No way. I wasn't spying, I was just doing my research, asking questions and—"

"Sweetheart, it don't matter what you call it. Ms. Bailey got pissed off and went running up in people's houses, claiming they owed her money. I mean, you probably doubled her income, just like that. And you're really not getting *any* kickbacks? Just a little something from her?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "How do they know I was the one who gave Ms. Bailey the information?"

"Because, you fool, she *told* everyone! Even if she didn't tell them, she was running around saying, 'You made twenty-five dollars last month,' 'You made fifty dollars last week,' 'You made ten dollars this week, and you owe me ten percent plus a penalty for not telling me.' I mean, the only folks we told all this information to was you!"

"But did she charge you, too?"

"No, no! She don't charge the hos, remember? J.T. already charges us."

I sat and listened with my head down as Clarisse listed all the women who'd been confronted by Ms. Bailey. I had a sinking feeling that I'd have a hard time coming back to this building to continue my research. I also had to face the small matter of managing to leave here today still in one piece.

Clarisse sensed my anxiety. As she talked—laughing heartily all the while, at my expense—she started massaging my shoulder. "Don't worry, little baby! You probably never had an ass whuppin', have you? Well, sometimes that helps clear the air. Just don't take the stairs when you leave, 'cause if you get caught there, they may never find your body."

I must have looked truly frightened, for Clarisse stopped laughing and took a sincere tone.

"Folks forgive around here," she said gently. "We're all religious people, sweetheart. We have to put up with a lot of shit from our own families, so nothing you did to us will make things much worse."

At that moment, sitting with Clarisse, I didn't think that even the Good Lord himself could, or would, help me. It was embarrassing to think that I had been so wrapped up in my desire to obtain good data that I couldn't anticipate the consequences of my actions. After several years in the projects, I had become attuned to each and every opportunity to get information from the tenants. This obsession was primarily fueled by a desire to make my dissertation stand out and increase my stature in the eyes of my advisers. After I'd talked with C-Note and Clarisse, it was clear to me that other people were paying a price for my success.

I began to feel deeply ambivalent about my own reasons for being in the projects. Would I really advance society with my research, as Bill Wilson had promised I could do if I worked hard?

Could I change our stereotypes of the poor by getting so deep inside the lives of the families? I suddenly felt deluged by these kinds of questions.

Looking back, I was probably being a little melodramatic. I had been so naïve up to this point about how others perceived my presence that any sort of shake-up at all was bound to send me reeling.

I couldn't think of a way to rectify the situation other than to stop coming to Robert Taylor entirely. But I was close to finishing my fieldwork, and I didn't want to quit prematurely. In the coming weeks, I spoke to Clarisse and Autry a few times for advice. Both suggested that the tenants I had angered would eventually stop being so angry, but they couldn't promise much more than that. When I asked Autry whether I'd be able to get back to collecting data, he just shrugged and walked off.

I eventually came back to the building to face the tenants. No one declined to speak with me outright, but I didn't exactly receive a hero's welcome either. Everyone knew I had J.T.'s support, so it was unlikely that anyone would confront me in a hostile manner. When I went to visit C-Note in the parking lot, he simply nodded at me and then went about his work, talking with customers and singing along with the radio. It felt like people in the building looked at me strangely when I passed by, but I wondered if I was just being paranoid. Perhaps the best indicator of my change in status was that I wasn't doing much of anything *casual*—hearing jokes, sharing a beer, loaning someone a dollar.

One sultry summer day not long after my fiasco with the hustlers, I attended the funeral of Catrina, Ms. Bailey's dutiful assistant. On the printed announcement, her full name was rendered as Catrina Eugenia Washington. But I knew this was not her real name.

Catrina had once told me that her father had sexually abused her when she was a teenager, so she ran away from home. She wound up living in Robert Taylor with a distant relative. She changed her name so her father wouldn't find her and enrolled in a GED program at DuSable High School. She took a few part-time jobs to help pay for rent and groceries. She was also saving money to go to community college; she was trying to start over. I never did find out her real name.

As a kid she had wanted to study math. But her father, she told me, said that higher education was inappropriate for a young black woman. He advised her instead just to get married and have children.

Catrina had a love of knowledge and would participate in a discussion about nearly anything. I enjoyed talking with her about science, African-American history, and Chicago politics. She always wore a studious look, intense and focused. Working as Ms. Bailey's assistant, she received just a few dollars a week. But, far more significant, she was receiving an apprenticeship in Chicago politics. "I will do something important one day," she liked to tell me, in her most serious voice. "Like Ms. Bailey, I *will* make a difference for black people. Especially black women."

By this time Catrina had been living in Robert Taylor for a few years. But over the July Fourth holiday, she decided to visit her siblings in Chicago's south suburbs, an area increasingly populated with African-American families who'd made it out of the ghetto. From what I was told, her father heard that she was visiting and tracked her down. A skirmish followed. Catrina got caught between her brother, who was protecting her, and her angry father. A gun went off, and the bullet hit Catrina, killing her instantly. No one around Robert Taylor knew if either the brother or the father had been arrested.

The funeral was held in the back room of a large African Methodist Episcopal church on the grounds of Robert Taylor. The hot air was stifling, the sun streaming in shafts through dusty windows. There were perhaps fifty people in attendance, mostly women from Ms. Bailey's building. A few members of Catrina's family were also there, but they came surreptitiously because they didn't want her father to hear about the funeral. Ms. Bailey stationed herself at the room's entrance, welcoming the mourners. She looked as if she were presiding over a tenant meeting: upright, authoritarian, refusing to cry while consoling those who were. She had the air of someone who did this regularly, who mourned for someone every week.

Sitting in a corner up front was T-Bone, his head down, still as stone. He and Catrina had been seeing each other for a few months. Although T-Bone had a steady girlfriend—it wasn't uncommon for gang members, or practically any other young man in the projects, to have multiple girlfriends—he and Catrina had struck up a friendship and, over time, become lovers. I sometimes came upon the two of them studying together at a local diner. T-Bone was about to leave his girlfriend for Catrina when she was killed.

Any loss of life is mourned in the projects, but there are degrees. Young men and women who choose a life of drugs and street gangs may, understandably, not be long for this world. When one of them dies, he or she is certainly mourned, but without any great sense of shock; there is a general feeling that death was always a good possibility. But for someone like Catrina, who had refused to follow such a path, death came with a deep sense of shock and disbelief. She was one of thousands of young people who had escaped the attention of social workers, the police, and just about everyone else. Adults in the projects pile up their hopes on people like Catrina, young men and

women who take a sincere interest in education, work, and self-betterment. And I guess I did, too. Her death left me with a sting that would never fade.

The essays that Catrina used to write covered the difficulties of family life in the projects, the need for women to be independent, the stereotypes about poor people. Writing seemed to provide Catrina a sense of relief, as though she were finally acknowledging the hurdles of her own past; it also helped her develop a strong, assertive voice, not unlike that of her hero, Ms. Bailey.

In tribute to Catrina, I thought I'd try to broaden this idea by starting a writing workshop for young women in the building who were interested in going back to school. I brought up the possibility with Ms. Bailey. "Good idea," she said, "but take it slow, especially when you're dealing with *these* young women."

I was nervous about teaching the workshop, but I was also eager. My relationship with tenants up to this point had largely been a one-way street; after all this time in Robert Taylor, I felt as though I should give something back. On a few occasions, I had managed to solicit donations from my professors, fifty or a hundred dollars, for some kind of program in the neighborhood. This money might do a great deal of good, but it seemed to me a fairly impersonal way of helping. I was hoping to do something more direct.

In the past I hadn't been drawn to standard charitable activities like coaching basketball or volunteering at a school, because I wanted to differentiate myself from the people who helped families and ran programs in the community. I had heard many tenants criticize the patronizing attitudes of such volunteers. The writing workshop, however, seemed like a good fit. Having hung out in the community for several years, I believed I could avoid the kind of fate—

exclusion, cold stares, condescending responses—that often greeted the people who rode into town to do good.

I was also still reeling from the fact that I had alienated so many people around J.T.'s territory. I was feeling guilty, and I needed to get people back on my side again.

Of all the people in the projects, I had the least experience spending time with young women, particularly single mothers. I was a bit nervous, particularly because Ms. Bailey, Ms. Mae, and other older women warned me not to get too close to the young women. They felt that the women would begin looking to me as a source of support.

In the beginning the group convened wherever we could—in someone's apartment, at a diner, outside under a tree. At first there were five women in the group, and then we grew to roughly a dozen as more people heard about it. The meetings were pretty casual, and attendance could be spotty, since the women had family and work obligations.

From the outset it was an emotional experience. The women wrote and spoke openly about their struggles. Each of them had at least a couple of children, which generally meant at least one "baby daddy" who wasn't in the picture. Each of them had a man in her life who'd been either jailed or killed. They spoke of in-laws who demanded that the women give up their children to the father's family, some of whom were willing to use physical force to claim the children.

Their material hardships were overwhelming. Most of them earned no more than ten thousand dollars a year, a combination of welfare payments and food stamps. Some worked part-time, and others took in boarders who paid cash or, nearly as valuable, provided day care so the young women could work, run errands, or just have a little time for themselves.

The most forceful stories were the tales of abuse. Every single woman had been beaten up by a boyfriend (who was usually drunk at the time), some almost fatally. Every one of them had lived in fear for days or weeks, waiting for the same man to return.

One cold autumn evening, we congregated at a local diner. We found a large table in the back, where it was quiet. The owner was by now accustomed to our presence, and he didn't mind that we stayed for hours. If business was particularly good, he'd feed us all night long and then waive the tab. He and I had struck up a friendship—I often came to the diner to write up my field notes—and he liked the fact that I was trying to help tenants.

The theme of this week's essay was "How I Survive." Tanya was the first to read from her journal. She was twenty years old, a high-school dropout with two children. She'd stayed with her mother after the first child was born but eventually got her own apartment in the same building, then had a second baby. She didn't know the whereabouts of the first father; the second had died in a gang shooting. In her essay she bragged about how she earned twice her welfare income by taking in boarders.

"But sometimes it doesn't go so well, Sudhir," said one of the other women, Sarina, who liked to be the voice of reason. She stared down Tanya as she spoke. Sarina had three children, the fathers of whom were, respectively, in jail, dead, and unwilling to pay child support. So she, too, had taken in boarders. "I remember when my brother came into the house, he started dealing dope and they caught him. Almost took my lease away."

"Yeah, but that's just because you didn't pay the building manager enough money," Tanya said. "Or I think that it was because you didn't sleep with him!"

"Well, I'm not doing either one of those things," Sarina said in a moralistic tone, shaking her head.

"You got some nerve," interrupted Keisha. "Sarina, you put your ass out there for any man who comes looking." At twenty-six, Keisha was one of the oldest women in the group. Even though she had grown angry with me for sharing information about hustlers with Ms. Bailey, she hadn't held the grudge for long. She had two daughters and was the best writer in the group, a high-school graduate now planning to apply to Roosevelt College. "Hell, there ain't no difference between some ho selling her shit and you taking some man in your house for money."

"Hey, *that's* survival!" Tanya said. "I mean, that's what we're here to talk about, right?"

"Okay," I jumped in, trying to establish some order. "What's the best way for you to take care of whatever you need to? Give me the top ten ways you survive."

Sarina began. "Always make sure you know someone at the CHA you can turn to when you can't make rent. It helps, because you could get evicted."

"Yeah, and if you have to sleep with a nigger downtown, then you got to do it," said Keisha. "Because if you don't, they *will* put your kids on the street."

Sarina went on, ignoring Keisha. "You got to make sure you can get clothes and food and diapers for your kids," she said. "Even if you don't have money. So you need to have good relations with stores."

"Make sure Ms. Bailey's always getting some dick!" Keisha shouted, laughing hard.

"You know, one time I had to let her sleep with *my* man so I wouldn't get kicked out of the building," Chantelle said.

"That's awful," I said.

"Yeah," Chantelle said. "And he almost left me, too, when he found out that Ms. Bailey could get him a job and would let him stay up there and eat all her food." Chantelle was twenty-one. Her

son had learning disabilities, so she was struggling to find a school that could help him. She worked part-time at a fast-food restaurant and depended on her mother and grandmother for day care and cash.

Chantelle's hardships weren't uncommon in the projects. Unfortunately, neither was her need to appease Ms. Bailey. The thought that a tenant had to let the building president sleep with her partner was alarming to me. But among these women such indignities weren't rare. To keep your own household intact, they said, you had to keep Ms. Bailey happy and well paid. As I heard more stories similar to Chantelle's, I found myself growing angry at Ms. Bailey and the other LAC officials. I asked Chantelle and the other women why they didn't challenge Ms. Bailey. Their answer made perfect sense: When it became obvious that the housing authority supported a management system based on extortion and corruption, the women decided their best option was to shrug their shoulders and accept their fate.

I found it unconscionable that such a regime existed, but I wasn't going to confront Ms. Bailey either. She was too powerful. And so while the women's anger turned into despair, my disgust began to morph into bitterness.

The women's list of survival techniques went well beyond ten. Keep cigarettes in your apartment so you can pay off a squatter to fix things when they break. Let your child pee in the stairwell to keep prostitutes from congregating there at night. Let the gangs pay you to store drugs and cash in your apartment. (The risk of apprehension, the women concurred, was slim.)

Then there were all the resources to be procured in exchange for sex: groceries from the bodega owner, rent forgiveness from the CHA, assistance from a welfare bureaucrat, preferential treatment from a police officer for a jailed relative. The women's explanation

for using sex as currency was consistent and pragmatic: If your child was in danger of going hungry, then you did whatever it took to fix the problem. The women looked pained when they discussed using their bodies to obtain these necessities; it was clear that this wasn't their first—or even their hundredth—preference.

"Always know somebody at the hospital," Tanya blurted out. "Always have somebody you can call, because that ambulance never comes. And when you get there, you need to pay somebody, or else you'll be waiting in line forever!"

"Yes, that's true, and the people at the hospital can give you free baby food," Sarina said. "Usually you need to meet them in the back alley. And I'd say you should keep a gun or a knife hidden, in case your man starts beating you. Because sometimes you have to do something to get him to stop."

"You've had to use a knife before?" I asked. No one had spoken or written about this yet. "How often?"

"Many times!" Sarina looked at me as if I'd grown up on Mars. "When these men start drinking, you can't talk to them. You just need to protect yourself—and don't forget, they'll beat up the kids, too."

Keisha started to cry. She dropped her head into her lap and covered up so no one could see. Sarina leaned over and hugged her.

"The easiest time is when they're asleep," Tanya said. "They're lying there, mostly because they've passed out drunk. That's when it runs through your mind. You start thinking, 'I could end it right here. I could kill the motherfucker, right now. Then he can't beat me no more.' I think about it a lot."

Keisha wiped her eyes. "I stabbed that nigger because I couldn't take it no more. Wasn't anybody helping me. Ms. Bailey said she couldn't do nothing, the police said they couldn't do nothing. And

this man was coming around beating me and beating my baby for no reason. I couldn't think of any other way, couldn't think of nothing else to do. . . ."

She began to sob again. Sarina escorted her to the bathroom.

"She sent her man to the hospital," Tanya quietly explained. "Almost killed him. One night he was asleep on the couch—he had already sent *her* to the hospital a few times, broke her ribs, she got stitches and bruises all over her body. She grabbed that knife and kept putting it in his stomach. He got up and ran out the apartment. I think one of J.T.'s boys took him to the hospital. He's a BK."

Because the boyfriend was a senior gang member, Tanya said, J.T. refused to pressure him to stop beating Keisha. She still lived in fear that the man would return.

One day Ms. Bailey called and asked that I come to a building-wide meeting with her tenants. She hadn't invited me to such a meeting in more than a year, so I figured something important was afoot.

I hadn't been keeping up with Ms. Bailey's tenant meetings in part because I'd already amassed sufficient information on these gatherings and also because, in all honesty, I'd grown uncomfortable watching the horse-trading schemes that she and other tenant leaders used to manage the community.

My own life was also starting to evolve. I had moved in with my girlfriend, Katchen, and we were thinking about getting married. Visiting our relatives—mine in California and hers in Montana—took time away from my fieldwork, including much of our summers and vacations. My parents were thrilled, and they pushed me to think seriously about starting a family along with a career. Katchen was applying to law school; neither of us was ready for children just yet.

And then there was the matter of my dissertation, which I still had to write. I began to meet more regularly with Bill Wilson and other advisers to see whether I could plausibly move toward wrapping up my graduate study.

Ms. Bailey's office was packed for the meeting when I arrived, with a few dozen people in attendance, all talking excitedly. As usual, most of them were older women, but there were also several men standing in the back. I recognized a couple of them as the partners of women in the building; it was unusual to see these men at a public meeting. Ms. Bailey waved me up front, pointing me to the chair next to hers.

"Okay," she said, "Sudhir has agreed to come here today so we can clear this up."

I was taken aback. Clear *what* up? Everyone was suddenly staring at me, and they didn't look happy.

"Why are you sleeping with my daughter?" shouted a woman I didn't recognize. "Tell me, goddamn it! Why are you fucking my baby?"

"Answer the woman!" someone else hollered. I couldn't tell who was talking, but it didn't matter: I was in a state of shock.

One man, addressing me as "Arab," told me I should get out of the neighborhood for good and especially leave alone their young women. Other people joined in:

"Nigger, get out of here!"

"Arab, go home!"

"Get the fuck out, Julio!"

Ms. Bailey tried to restore order. Amid the shouting she yelled out that I would explain myself.

I was still confused. "Let Sudhir tell you why he's meeting them!"