

First Days on Federal Street

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right, so . . . ?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No! I'm just trying to—"

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

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

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

"I like it, I like it." He paused. "Okay, get the fuck out, gotta run." He offered his hand as I opened the car door. I shook it and nodded at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

45

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The gang protects the squatters?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you guys bring them to the hospital?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We just keep the peace, that's all," he muttered, and walked away. J.T. sometimes spoke vaguely like this, which I took as a sign to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But he didn't even blink.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I loved the nightlife on the galleries. And the tenants were generally in a good mood at night, willing to tell me about their lives if they weren't too high or too busy trying to make money. It was get-

ting easier for me to determine when people were high. They'd stagger a bit, as if they were drunk, but their eyes sank back in their heads, giving them a look that was both dreamy and sinister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're part of their family?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you working now?" I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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