

as my tenure in the projects was ending, I was noticing the darker side of avoidance.

With other tenants I played the role of objective social scientist, however inaccurate (and perhaps impossible) this academic conceit may be. I didn't necessarily feel that I was misrepresenting my intentions. I always told people, for instance, that I was writing up my findings into a dissertation. But it was obvious that there was a clear power dynamic and that they held the short end of the stick. I had the choice of ending my time in the projects; they did not. Long after I was finished studying poverty, they would most likely continue living as poor Americans.

The Stay-Together Gang

One July day in 1995, I drove to Calumet Heights, a neighborhood that lay just across the expressway from Chicago's South Side. In an otherwise run-down working-class area, Calumet Heights stood out for its many middle- and upper-class black families who took great pride in the appearance of their houses. The neighborhood was also home to several of the most powerful gang leaders in the Midwest, including Jerry Tillman and Brian Jackson of the Black Kings. In a practice common among gang leaders, Jerry and Brian had each bought a big suburban home for their moms, and they both spent considerable time there themselves.

Today they were throwing a BK pool party at Brian's house; Jerry was supplying the food and beer. Brian lived in a long, white, Prairie-style home built in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright. Parked on the lawn were a dozen expensive sports cars, which belonged to the BK senior leadership, and a lot of lesser sports cars parked along the curb, which belonged to the junior leadership. A bunch of young

men stood around idly on the lawn, caps shading their eyes from the sun. These were BK foot soldiers, in charge of guarding their bosses' cars.

I parked my own rusting Cutlass at the curb and approached the house. I spotted Barry, one of J.T.'s foot soldiers, standing next to J.T.'s purple Malibu. He nodded me toward the house's rear entrance.

J.T. had been meeting regularly with Chicago's highest-ranking BK leaders for some time before he invited me to this party. I was excited. I had envisioned half-naked women sitting poolside and rubbing the bosses with sunscreen while everyone passed around marijuana joints and cold beer.

What I saw for real was far less glamorous. True to stereotype, there was an expensive stereo blasting rap music through a dozen speakers and some big crystal statues of wild animals, and a few people were indeed rolling joints. But overall the place looked as worn as an old fraternity house. The leather couches were badly stained, and so were the carpets. I found out later that the gangsters' mothers felt lonely in the suburbs and told their sons they preferred living in the ghetto, with their friends. Nor were there any half-naked women to be seen, or any women at all. It was a members-only party, and seemingly a pretty tight-knit affair. J.T. had told me that these gatherings were held every few weeks, more often if there were pressing matters to discuss. Although the events were mostly social, he said, the gang leaders inevitably wound up talking business as the evening wore on. Which wholesaler was offering the best and cheapest cocaine? Which neighborhood gangs were acting up and needed discipline?

I bumped into J.T. as he came out of the kitchen. We shook hands and hugged; he seemed to be in a good mood. Small groups of men were congregating in the kitchen, the dining room, and the

living room. I could hear the roar of computer games in a back room. Everyone seemed relaxed and at ease.

J.T. brought me over to a group of men and introduced me as "the Professor," which prompted laughs all around. Most of the men were large, their potbellies perhaps the best evidence of a capacity for self-indulgence. They were all tattooed and wore showy gold and silver jewelry. As I would find out later, every one of them had been jailed on a felony at least once.

J.T. hadn't told me exactly how he'd explained my presence to his colleagues and superiors. I just had to trust him. No one seemed even remotely threatened—but then again I wasn't walking around with a tape recorder or asking intrusive questions. In fact, I didn't need to. The men would randomly come up to me and start talking about themselves and, especially, the history of the Black Kings. "In the 1960s, gangs were leading a black revolution," one of them said. "We're trying to do the same." Another took a similar tack, echoing what J.T. had told me many times: "You need to understand that the Black Kings are not a *gang*; we are a *community organization*, responding to people's needs."

One of the men put his arm around me warmly and escorted me into the dining room, where a poker game was being played. There must have been thirty thousand or forty thousand dollars in bills on the table. My guide introduced himself as Cliff. He was a senior BK, in his late forties, who acted as a sort of consigliere for the gang, providing advice to the up-and-coming leaders. "All right, folks, listening advice to the up-and-coming leaders. They glanced up!" he said, trying to gain the poker players' attention. They glanced up briefly. "This is our new director of communications," Cliff said. "The Professor is going to help us get our word out. Make sure you all talk with him before you leave."

I shuddered. J.T. was sitting on the couch with a beer in his

hand. He just smiled and shrugged. Two thoughts ran through my mind. On the one hand, I was impressed that J.T. had the confidence to invite me and nominate me for such an exalted position (although part of me felt like I was on the receiving end of a surreal practical joke; perhaps they were just testing my mettle?). On the other hand, knowing that these men managed an organized criminal enterprise, I was scared that I was falling into a hole I could never dig myself out of. I had repeatedly tried to distance myself from the gang, or at least stake out my neutrality. But J.T.'s warning from years earlier rang just as true today: "Either you're with me or you're with someone else." In this world there was no such thing as neutral, as much as the precepts of my academic field might state otherwise.

attended several of these high-level BK gatherings. Although I didn't conduct any formal interviews, in just a few months I was able to learn a good bit about the gang leaders and their business by just hanging around. Over time they seemed to forget that I was even there, or maybe they just didn't care. They rarely spoke openly about drugs, other than to note the death of a supplier or a change in the price of powder cocaine. Most of their talk concerned the burdens of management: how to keep the shorties in line, how to best bribe tenant leaders and police officers, which local businesses were willing to launder their cash.

I did harbor a low-grade fear that I would someday be asked to represent the BKs in a press release or a media interview. But that fear wasn't enough to prevent me from attending as many parties and poker games as J.T. invited me to. I would joke on occasion with J.T.'s superiors that I really had no skills or services to offer them. They never formally appointed me as their director of communications—

or even made such an explicit offer, so I just assumed that no such role really existed.

As a member of the younger set of leaders who had only recently been promoted to these ranks, J.T. was generally a quiet presence. He didn't speak much with me either. But my presence seemed to provide him with some value. It signaled to the others that J.T. had leadership capacities and unique resources: namely, that he was using his link with a student from a prestigious university to help remake the gang's image in the wider world. To that end, the gang leaders continued to approach me to discuss the gang's history and its "community-building" efforts. I took most of this with a grain of salt, as I'd come to consider such claims not only blatantly self-serving but greatly exaggerated.

Watching J.T. operate in this rarefied club, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in him. By now I had spent about six years hanging out with J.T., and at some level I was pleased that he was winning recognition for his achievements. Such thoughts were usually accompanied by an equally powerful disquietude at the fact that I took so much pleasure in the rise of a drug-dealing gangster.

Now that he'd graduated into the gang's leadership, J.T. became even more worried about the basic insecurities of gang life—the constant threat of arrest and imprisonment, injury and death. This anxiety had begun to grow in the weeks after Price was wounded in the drive-by shooting. J.T. began asking me to review his life year by year so that I wouldn't be missing any details for his biography. By this point my dissertation had little to do with J.T., and I believe he knew that, even though I'd been hesitant to say so outright. Still, the arrests were making him nervous, and he wanted to be sure that I was faithfully recording the events of his life. He also became obsessed with saving money for his mother and his children in case

something happened to him. He even began selling off some of his cars and expensive jewelry.

At the same time, he started to make more money because of his promotion. Not only were there additional BK sales crews whose earnings J.T. could tax, but, as if in an investment bank or law-firm partnership, he also began receiving a share of the overall BK revenues produced by drug sales, extortion, and taxation. By now he was probably earning at least two hundred thousand dollars a year in cash.

His promotion also carried additional risk. At the suburban meetings I attended, the leaders spoke anxiously about which gang leaders had been named in federal indictments and who was most likely to cooperate with the authorities. I also heard about a young gang member who'd been severely beaten because his bosses thought he had turned snitch.

Amid the beer drinking, gambling, and carousing at these parties, there was a strong undercurrent of paranoia. For me it was a bizarre experience, since the leaders began voicing their fears to me privately, as if I were a confessor of some sort, knowledgeable about their trade but powerless to harm them. Cold Man, a forty-five-year-old leader who ran the BKs' operation on the city's West Side, asked me to step outside for a cigarette so we could talk. He tended to take the long view. "We need to be careful in these times of war," he told me, alluding to the arrests and their potential to create turncoats within the gang. "Don't trust nobody, especially your friends. I love these niggers, they're my family, but now is not the time to go soft."

Pootchie, a smart thirty-year-old leader who'd recently been promoted along with J.T., one night asked me to sit with him in his car to talk. "I'm not going to do this forever," he said. "I'm here to make my money and get the fuck out."

"What will you do next?" I asked. "I'm a dancer—tap, jazz, all of it. I'd like to get my own place and teach."

I couldn't help laughing. Pootchie looked sheepish. "Sorry!" I said. "I don't mean to laugh, but it's just surprising."

"Yeah, my father used to dance, and my mother was a singer. I dropped out of school—stupidest thing I ever did—but I got a business sense about me. I probably saved a few hundred grand. And I ain't getting arrested. No way. I got bigger things I'm into. Not like some of these jailhouse niggers. I ain't one of them. I'm an operator."

I learned that Pootchie's distinction between "jailhouse niggers" and "operators" was an essential one. These were the two kinds of leaders within the Black Kings. The first was devoted to building solidarity and staying together during difficult times, like the present threat of widespread arrests. These leaders were known as "jailhouse niggers," since they had learned from prison that you didn't survive unless you formed alliances and loyalties. These men tended to be the older leaders, in their late thirties or forties, and they tended to speak more of the BK "family" as opposed to the BK "business." The "operators," meanwhile, were a more entrepreneurial breed, like Pootchie and J.T. They were usually younger—J.T. was about thirty by now—and saw the gang primarily as a commercial enterprise. J.T. wanted to be a respected "community man," to be sure, but that was more of a practical gambit than an ideological one.

Riding back to the South Side one night with J.T. from a sub-urban poker game, I sat quietly in the dark. J.T. was in a somber mood. As we pulled up to my apartment building, he admitted that the federal indictments were driving everyone a bit mad. "No one trusts nobody," he said. "They'll shoot you for looking funny." J.T.

shook his head. "I never realized how easy life was when it was just the projects. If they think I'm talking with the cops, I'll be killed right away. Sometimes I think I should get my money and get out."

As he said this, I immediately thought, *I'd better get my data and get out!* But I didn't. I kept going back to the BK meetings. With the gang's most senior officers talking to me, I figured I'd better be careful about how I chose to exit the group. As paranoid as everyone was these days, now was not the time for sudden movements.

life had also become complicated by the possible demolition of the Robert Taylor Homes. He was smart enough to know that his success was due in considerable part to geography: The concentration of people around Robert Taylor and its great location, near traffic corridors and expressways, guaranteed a huge customer base. J.T. might have been a good businessman, but every drug dealer in Chicago knew that Robert Taylor was among the best sales locations in the city.

So if the projects were torn down, J.T. would lose his customer base as well as much of his gang membership, since most of his young members lived in Robert Taylor.

Accordingly, J.T. was far less sanguine about the demolition than some tenants were. He thought it was folly to think that poor families could alter the buildings' fate. Sometimes he'd just sit detachedly when we were together, muttering to himself, "Man, I need a plan. I need a plan. I *have* to think what I'm going to do. . . ."

He also had to worry about retaining his senior leaders, Price and T-Bone. They, too, were getting anxious, since their best shot at success—and their biggest incentive to stay in the gang—was the opportunity to become a leader. If Robert Taylor was torn down, then J.T.'s stock would probably fall, and so would theirs.

When I asked T-Bone how he felt about the future, he soberly described his vulnerability as a lieutenant to J.T. "I'm not protected, that's my main problem," he said. "I got nothing, so I have to be real careful. I mean, I save my money and give it to my mom. Like I told you, I want to get my degree and do something else with my life, start a business maybe. But with all the police coming around, I got to be careful. It's people like me who go to prison. The ones up on the mountain always strike a deal."

But if he left the gang suddenly, I asked him, wouldn't his bosses suspect he was collaborating with the police?

"Yeah," he said with a laugh. "If I leave the gang, these niggers will come after me and kill me. If I stay in the gang, the police will throw me in jail for thirty years. But that's the life. . . ."

As his voice trailed off, I wanted to cry. I liked T-Bone, so much so that sometimes I almost forgot he was a gang member. At the moment he seemed like a bookish kid, working hard and worrying about passing his classes.

Not long afterward T-Bone's girlfriend left a message instructing me to meet him at dusk in a parking lot near the expressway. I did as I was told. "You were always interested in how we do things," T-Bone said, "so here you go." He handed me a set of spiral-bound ledgers that detailed the gang's finances. He seemed remorseful—and anxious. He wondered aloud what his life would have been like if he'd "stayed legit." I could tell he was expecting a bad ending.

The pages of the ledgers were frayed, and some of the handwriting was hard to decipher, but the raw information was fascinating. For the past four years, T-Bone had been dutifully recording the gang's revenues (from drug sales, extortion, and other sources) and expenses (the cost of wholesale cocaine and weapons, police bribes, funeral expenses, and all the gang members' salaries).

It was dangerous for T-Bone to give me this information, a bla-

tant violation of the gang's codes, for which he would be severely punished if caught. T-Bone knew of my interest in the gang's economic structure. He saw how delighted I was now, fondling the ledgers as if they were first editions of famous books.

I never shared the notebooks with anyone in law enforcement. I put them away for a few years until I met the economist Steven Levitt. We published several articles based on this rich data source, and our analysis of the gang's finances easily received the most notoriety of all the articles and books I have written. T-Bone probably had no idea that I would receive any critical acclaim, but he certainly knew that he was handing me something that few others—in the academy or in the world at large—had ever seen. Looking back, I think he probably wanted to help me, but I also believe he wanted to do something good before meeting whatever bad ending might have been coming his way. Given his love of books and education, it is not altogether inconceivable that T-Bone wanted this to be a charitable act of sorts, helping the world better understand the structure of gangland.

Perhaps the most surprising fact in T-Bone's ledgers was the incredibly low wage paid to the young members who did the dirtiest and most dangerous work: selling drugs on the street. According to T-Bone's records, they barely earned minimum wage. For all their braggadocio, to say nothing of the peer pressure to spend money on sharp clothes and cars, these young members stood little chance of ever making a solid payday unless they beat the odds and were promoted into the senior ranks. But even Price and T-Bone, it turned out, made only about thirty thousand dollars a year. Now I knew why some of the younger BK members supplemented their income by working legit jobs at McDonald's or a car wash.

So a gang leader like J.T. had a tough job: motivating young men to accept the risks of selling drugs despite the low wages and slim

chance of promotion. It was one thing to motivate his troops in the Robert Taylor Homes, where BK lore ran deep and the size of the drug trade made the enterprise seem appealingly robust. It would be much harder to start up operations from scratch in a different neighborhood.

I got to witness this challenge firsthand one evening when I accompanied J.T., Price, and T-Bone to West Pullman, a predominantly black neighborhood on the far South Side. Although there were poor sections of West Pullman, it also had a solid working-class base, with little gang activity. That was where the three Black Kings were trying to set up a new BK franchise. J.T. had arranged a meeting with about two dozen young men, a ragtag group of high-school dropouts and some older teenagers, most of whom spent the majority of their time just hanging out. J.T. wanted to help them become "black businessmen," he told them.

They sat on wooden benches in the corner of a small neighborhood park. Most of them had boyish faces. Some looked innocent, some bored, and some eager, as if attending the first meeting of their Little League team. J.T. stood in front of them like their coach, extolling the benefits of "belonging to the Black Kings family, a nationwide family." He pointed to his latest car, a Mitsubishi 3000GT, as a sign of what you could get if you worked hard in the drug economy. He sounded a bit like a salesman.

A few of them asked about the particulars of the drug trade. Were they supposed to cook the crack themselves, or were they provided with the finished product? Could they extend credit to good customers, or was it strictly a cash business?

"My auntie said I should ask you if she could join also," one teenager said. "She says she has a lot of experience—"

J.T. cut him off. "Your auntie? Nigger, are you kidding me? Ain't no women allowed in this thing."

"Well, she said that back in the day she was into selling dope," the teenager continued. "She said that you should call her, because she could help you understand how to run a business."

"All right, we'll talk about this later, my man," J.T. said, then turned to address the rest of the young men. "Listen, you all need to understand, we're taking you to a whole 'nother level. We're not talking about hanging out and getting girls. You'll get all the pussy you want, but this is about taking pride in who you are, about doing something for yourself and your people. Now, we figure you got nobody serving around here. So there's a real need—"

"Serving what?" the same teenager interrupted.

J.T. ignored him. "Like I said, you got no one responding to the demand, and we want to work with you-all. We're going to set up shop."

"Is there some kind of training?" asked a soft, sweet voice from the back. "And do we get paid to go? I got to be at White Castle on Mondays and Thursdays, and my mamma says if I lose that job, she'll kick me out of the house."

"White Castle?!" J.T. looked over in disbelief at T-Bone, Price, and me. "Nigger, I'm talking about taking control of your *life*. What is White Castle doing for you? I don't get it—how far can that take you?"

"I'm trying to save up for a bike," the boy replied.

Hearing that, J.T. headed for his car, motioning for Price to finish up with the group.

"We'll be in touch with you-all," Price said assertively. "Right now, you need to understand that we got this place, you dig? If anyone else comes over and says they want you to work with them, you tell them you are Black Kings. Got it?"

As Price continued speaking to the teenagers, I walked over to J.T. and asked if this meeting was typical.

"This shit is frustrating," he said, grabbing a soda from the car. "There's a lot of places where the kids ain't really done nothing. They have no idea what it means to be a part of something."

"So why do you want to do this?"

"Don't have a choice," he said. "We don't have any other places left to take over." Most city neighborhoods, he explained, were already claimed by a gang leader. It was nearly impossible to annex a territory with an entrenched gang structure unless the leader died or went to jail. Even in those cases, there were usually local figures with enough charisma and leverage to step in. This meant that J.T. had to expand into working- and middle-class neighborhoods where the local "gang" was nothing more than a bunch of teenagers who hung out and got into trouble. If today's meeting was any indication, these gangs weren't the ideal candidates for Black Kings membership.

"I can't believe I'm doing this shit," J.T. said, walking around his car, kicking stones in the dirt. Between the dual threats of arrest and demolition, he seemed to be coming to grips with the possibility that his star might have peaked.

he Black Kings weren't the only ones anxious about the threat of demolition. All the tenants of Robert Taylor were trying to cope with the news. Although demolition wouldn't begin for at least two years, everyone was scrambling to learn which building might come down first and where on earth they were supposed to live.

Politicians, including President Clinton and Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, promised that tenants would be relocated to middle-class neighborhoods with good schools, safe streets, and job opportunities. But reliable information was hard to come by. Nor would it be so easy to secure housing outside the black ghetto. The projects had been built forty years earlier in large part because white

Chicagoans didn't want black neighbors. Most Robert Taylor tenants thought the situation hadn't changed all that much.

The CHA began to hold public meetings where tenants could air their questions and concerns. The CHA officials begged for patience, promising that every family would have help when the time came for relocation. But there was legitimate reason for skepticism. One of the most inept and corrupt housing agencies in the country was now being asked to relocate 150,000 people living in roughly two hundred buildings slated for demolition throughout Chicago. And Robert Taylor was the largest housing project of all, the size of a small city. The CHA's challenge was being made even harder by Chicago's tightening real-estate market. As the city gentrified, there were fewer and fewer communities where low-income families could find decent, affordable housing.

Information, much of it contradictory, came in dribs and drabs. At one meeting the CHA stated that all Robert Taylor residents would be resettled in other housing projects—a frightening prospect for many, since that would mean crossing gang boundaries. At another meeting the agency said that some families would receive a housing voucher to help cover their rent in the private market. At yet another meeting it was declared that large families would be split up: aunts and uncles and grandparents who weren't on the lease would have to fend for themselves.

With so much confusion in the air, tenants came to rely on rumors. There was talk of a political conspiracy whereby powerful white politicians wanted to tear down Robert Taylor in order to spread its citizens around the city and dilute the black vote. There was even a rumor about me: word was going around that I worked for the CIA, gathering secret information to help expedite the demolition. I assumed that this theory arose out of my attempt to pro-

cure a Department of Justice grant for the Boys & Girls Club, but I couldn't say for sure.

Many tenants still clung to the idea that the demolition wouldn't happen at all, or at least not for a long time. But I couldn't find a single tenant who, regardless of his or her belief about the timing of the demolition, believed that the CHA would do a good job of relocation. Some people told me they were willing to bribe their building presidents for preferential treatment. Others were angry at the government for taking away their homes and wanted to stage protests to halt the demolition.

There was also a deep skepticism among tenants that their own elected leaders would work hard on their behalf. Ms. Bailey and other building presidents were being besieged by constituents desperate for advice.

One day I sat in Ms. Bailey's office as she waited for a senior CHA official to show up for a briefing. Several other tenant leaders were also waiting, in the outer room. Ms. Bailey made no effort to hide the fact that she, along with most of the other tenant leaders, had already agreed to support the demolition rather than try to save the buildings. "The CHA made things perfectly clear to us," she explained. "These buildings *are* coming down." She spoke to me as if I were a five-year-old, with no understanding whatsoever of city politics. "Of course, you got a few people who think they can stop this, but I keep telling them, 'Look out for your own family, and get out while you can.' I'm looking out for *myself*."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"That means I got one shot to get what I can from the CHA for me and for my people. The CHA don't have no money, Sudhir. They made that clear to us. And you know they just want to get u out of here, so I'm going to get *something* out of this."

"Like what?"

"Well, I already told them I need a five-bedroom house in South Shore," she said with a rich laugh. Then she told me the building presidents' personal requests. "Ms. Daniels wants the CHA to give her son's construction company a contract to help tear down the buildings. Ms. Wilson made a list of appliances she wants in her new apartment. Ms. Denny will be starting a new business, and the CHA needs to hire her to help relocate families."

"And you think the CHA will actually agree to these demands?"

Ms. Bailey just sat and stared at me. Apparently my naïveté was showing once more.

I tried again. "You already got them to agree, didn't you?"

Again she was silent.

"Is that what this meeting is about?" I motioned toward the outer room where the other building presidents were waiting. "Is that why this guy from the CHA is coming?"

"Well, no," she said. "We already had *that* conversation. Today is about the families. Let me tell you how this process is going to go. I know it's early, but they're already tearing down the projects on the West Side, so there ain't no mystery anymore." The Henry Horner projects on the West Side were being razed to make way for a new sports arena, the United Center, which would host the Chicago Bulls, the Chicago Blackhawks, and, eventually, the 1996 Democratic National Convention. "We'll make our list, and they'll take care of our people."

"Your list?"

"I already told you the CHA has no money, Sudhir! What part of this don't you understand?" She grew very animated and then suddenly quieted down. "They can't help everyone. And you know what? They'll mess up like they messed up in the past. Not everyone is going to be taken care of."

Ms. Bailey said that she would likely be able to help only about one-fourth of the families move out safely. Her bigger job, she said, was to make sure that the remaining three-fourths grasped this reality. The CHA, she said, "plans to use most of their money to demolish the buildings, not help people move out."

So Ms. Bailey and the other building presidents made lists of the families who they felt should have priority in obtaining rent vouchers, assistance in finding a new apartment, or free furniture and appliances. This list, it turned out, didn't necessarily comprise the neediest families—but, rather, the building presidents' personal friends or tenants who had paid them small bribes.

I asked Ms. Bailey how much she was getting.

"Sudhir, I'll be honest with you," she said, smiling. "We'll be taken care of. But don't forget to put in your little book that the CHA also gets their share. We're all washing each other's hands around here."

It wasn't very pleasant to watch this entire scenario play out in two parallel worlds. In the media all you heard were politicians' promises to help CHA tenants forge a better life. On the ground, meanwhile, the lowest-ranking members of society got pushed even lower, thanks to a stingy and neglectful city agency and the constant hustling of the few people in a position to help. In the coming months, the place began to take on the feel of a refugee camp, with every person desperate to secure her own welfare, quite possibly at the expense of a neighbor.

Not everyone, however, was so selfish or fatalistic. For some tenants demolition represented a chance to start fresh with a better apartment in a safer neighborhood. It was particularly inspiring to watch such tenants work together toward this goal while their elected leaders mainly looked out for themselves.

One such optimist was Dorothy Battie, a forty-five-year-old

mother of six who had spent nearly her entire life in the projects. Dorothy lived in a building a few blocks away from J.T. She was a heavyset woman, deeply religious, who always had a positive demeanor despite having suffered through everything the projects had to offer. Her father and several nieces and nephews had been killed in various gang shootings. Dorothy had fought through her own drug addiction, then helped other addicts enter rehab. Some of her children were now in college, and one was a leader in a Black Kings gang.

Dorothy had never been an elected tenant leader, but she was a self-appointed godmother to countless families. She helped squatters find shelter, fed tenants who couldn't afford to eat, and provided day care for many children, some related by blood and others not. Spurred on now by the demolition, she began to act as a sort of relocation counselor for several families who were determined to live near one another in a new neighborhood. They thought that sticking together was their best, and maybe only, chance for survival. These families became informally known as "the Stay-Together Gang," and their undisputed ringleader was Dorothy.

I caught up with her one day in her living room as she was looking over a list of the families she most wanted to help.

"Let's see," she said, "I got Cherry, three kids. Candy, two kids. Marna, a son and a daughter. Princess, three kids. Carrie, two young girls. And there's probably a few more." All these young women were friends who shared baby-sitting, cars, and cooking. Now their mission, with Dorothy's help, was to find a place to live where they could keep their network intact.

"See, here's the problem," Dorothy explained. "I know what it's like out there in the private market. You end up in some apartment, with no one around, no one to help you. And you're scared. At least if a few people can move with each other, stay together, they can help

each other. Lot of people out there don't like us because we come from the projects. They may not answer the door if we knock for help. So I want to make sure people don't get stuck in the cold."

It was important, she said, to start with the most stable family in the network. That was Cherry, who worked thirty hours a week as a fast-food cashier and also went to night school. Dorothy's plan called for Cherry to find an apartment in a good neighborhood and then bring the other families over.

While this plan seemed pretty straightforward, Dorothy told me that success was hardly guaranteed. "Things never go as planned," she said bluntly, "because we're dealing with poor people."

Dorothy's first obstacle was Ms. Reemes, a powerful tenant in her building, who was not elected to any office but had great influence with the CHA and police. Like Ms. Bailey, Ms. Reemes expected families to pay her a fee, anywhere from fifty to two hundred dollars, for smoothing the relocation process. Every family that Dorothy helped meant one less potential bribe for Ms. Reemes. Although the building hadn't even been singled out yet for demolition, Ms. Reemes was already accepting "deposits" from families who wanted a rent voucher or relocation services.

"She wanted *me* to give her a cut," Dorothy said, "and I told her I'm not even getting paid to help these people! So I told her to go to hell. That lady is so selfish."

As Dorothy told it, Ms. Reemes was so miffed by Dorothy's refusal to play the payoff game that she went on a harassment campaign. First, Dorothy said, Ms. Reemes put in a bad word about Dorothy with the CHA. Within a week Dorothy's two grown daughters, both of whom lived in the same building, received eviction notices for late payment of rent. This was particularly surprising, since one of her daughters had no income and was therefore excused from paying any rent at all. Dorothy successfully got the

eviction notices rescinded. Then a CHA janitor cut off the electricity in Dorothy's apartment, but Dorothy paid a squatter to restore it. Ms. Reemes then tried to get the gangs to harass Dorothy, not realizing that Dorothy's own son was a senior gang leader. He paid Ms. Reemes a personal visit, and she backed down.

Through a classified ad in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dorothy found a two-bedroom apartment for Cherry's family in Woodlawn, a poor but stable neighborhood about two miles away, near Hyde Park and the university. Because Dorothy had a CHA connection who helped Cherry get a \$500-a-month housing voucher, she had to pay only \$150 a month out of pocket.

Soon after Cherry moved in with her children and an aunt who would provide day care, Dorothy found a large apartment nearby for Princess and her three children. The only problem was that Princess's brother and uncle heard about this and decided that they also wanted to move in. If they were found to be living there, Princess would lose her rent voucher on the grounds of illegal tenancy. Worse yet, her brother and uncle were drug dealers who wanted to use Princess's apartment as a new base of operations. "Princess has put up with those two fools for too long, and it's hurting her kids," Dorothy told me. "I wanted her to start over, and now her brother and uncle are going to mess everything up."

So Dorothy, with Princess in tow, went to confront the two men at a local bar where they hung out. Princess was worried, since both of them smoked crack and were prone to violence, but Dorothy feared no one. As Princess later described it, Dorothy stormed into the bar and loudly told the two men they'd have *her* to deal with if they moved in with Princess. The men threatened to beat up Dorothy and then stomped away. They retaliated by calling Princess's new landlord and, posing as CHA officials, warned the landlord that Princess was a gang member. The landlord promptly called Dorothy.

He didn't necessarily believe that Princess was in a gang, he said, but he wasn't willing to take the chance. So Princess lost her lease. Dorothy eventually found Princess another apartment, but it was smaller, more expensive, and a few miles away from Cherry.

And then Marna was thrown in jail for six months for stabbing her boyfriend. Dorothy moved Marna's children around from one apartment to another so that the social workers couldn't find them and send them to foster care. Soon after, Dorothy heard that Candy had promised J.T. that the Black Kings could stash guns and drugs in the new apartment that Dorothy was helping her rent. Since J.T. was paying Candy for this service, Dorothy had little leverage to persuade her to do otherwise. Within a year Candy would lose her lease (and her rent subsidy) when the landlord called the police, having seen so many people tromping in and out of her apartment.

The most astounding story concerning Dorothy—one that I could never independently verify—also had to do with the police. She told me that Ms. Reemes called in Officer Jerry, the rogue cop, who caught her in the lobby, dragged her into a vacant apartment, planted drugs on her, and threatened to arrest her for possession if she didn't stop competing with Ms. Reemes. When Dorothy refused, Officer Jerry arrested her, but she managed to enlist some other police officers, including Officer Reggie, to set her free. According to Dorothy, Officer Jerry returned two weeks later and told Dorothy that if she just paid Ms. Reemes a share of "her cut"—which, Dorothy insisted, didn't exist—then he would leave her alone.

In the end Dorothy's list included twelve families chosen for the Stay-Together Gang. Despite her perseverance, she was able to help only four of them move out together, to neighboring apartments in Woodlawn and South Shore. I would spend much of the next decade keeping track of the Robert Taylor Homes' former tenants to see how they adapted to life beyond the projects. As it turned out,

Dorothy's success rate was easily as good as that of the various social-services agencies contracted by the CHA, each of which was awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars to carry out the job. Dorothy herself would stay in Robert Taylor until it was demolished, and then she joined her daughter, Lee-Lee, in Englewood, a high-crime, predominantly black neighborhood a few miles away.

Dorothy's move to Lee-Lee's house was, unfortunately, a typical outcome for many tenants who left Robert Taylor and other CHA projects. While the goal of the demolition was to move families to safer, integrated communities, the CHA was so inept that nearly 90 percent of the relocated tenants wound up living in poor black areas that left them as badly off as being in the projects, or worse.

In place of the projects, the city began to build market-rate condominiums and town houses, three-story structures tucked cozily together instead of the sixteen-story high-rises separated by vast expanses. Robert Taylor tenants had been promised the right to return to the community once construction was done, but fewer than 10 percent of the units were set aside for public-housing families. It is little wonder that the prevailing wisdom in Chicago is that the Daley administration and the powerful real-estate interests, rather than creating new and improved low-income housing, in fact knocked down the projects to initiate a land grab. As of this writing, the new apartments are set to house mostly middle- and upper-class families.

A few months after T-Bone gave me the Black Kings' financial ledgers, Ms. Bailey invited me to a back-to-school party for the children in her building. J.T. had given her a thousand dollars to throw the party and to buy the kids some sneakers, clothes, and school supplies.

I hadn't been spending much time around J.T.'s building in the months leading up to the party. I was generally holed up in the library, working on my dissertation. My advisers and I had agreed that it should explore how families cope with poverty—specifically, how CHA tenants solved problems and kept the community together without much help from the government or charities.

When I arrived for the party, it felt like my first visits from years earlier. There were cars parked all around the basketball court, rap music blasting away, kids running everywhere, and squatters grilling burgers and hot dogs to earn a little money. J.T. and his senior officers were drinking beer and casting an eye over the entire scene. J.T., Ms. Mae, Ms. Bailey, and some of the other tenants greeted me with the same carefree attitude they had showed me when I first began coming around. As I watched Ms. Bailey and some of the other older women tend to the children, I couldn't help but feel kind of nostalgic. Everyone looked a bit older and more fatigued—just like me, I suppose.

I saw something out of the corner of my eye that stopped me cold: a small garden bursting with bright orange, red, and purple geraniums. In this vast stretch of concrete and patchy lawn, littered with broken bottles, used condoms, and empty crack vials, here was an oasis. I laughed to myself. Why hadn't I ever noticed it before?

I'd been so caught up with gangs, political chicanery, and the life of poverty that I had missed something so beautiful right there in front of me. What else had I missed because of my incessant drive to hustle?

I thought back to the last time I'd noticed any flowers in Robert Taylor. It had been well over a year earlier. The tenants were preparing for a visit from President Bill Clinton. They were incredibly excited, but also unnerved. His visit was meant to highlight the unprecedented levels of gang violence in Chicago public housing.

Clinton supported the use of police "sweeps," the warrantless searches that the Chicago Police Department was using to combat the gang and drug problems. While the ACLU and other groups decried the sweeps as a violation of constitutional rights, Clinton argued that the right to "freedom from fear" was more important. He wanted inner-city residents to believe, as he believed, that the scourge of street gangs required extraordinary measures, and his trip to Robert Taylor provided a firsthand opportunity to persuade them.

In the weeks before his visit, the project was turned upside down. The police conducted even more sweeps than usual, sometimes ransacking apartments indiscriminately. They also conducted random spot checks in the building lobbies, arresting a great many suspected drug dealers, including many young men who had nothing whatsoever to do with dealing drugs.

J.T. didn't go so far as to halt drug sales, but he was a bit more cautious, sometimes having his dealers take customers inside to an apartment to obtain the drugs rather than getting them on the street. He also stopped extorting from local stores, fearing that that might lead to arrest. And he stopped laundering money, stowing his cash in garbage bags until the neighborhood quieted down.

On the streets, city tow trucks hauled away abandoned vehicles—as well as a lot of vehicles that might have looked abandoned but were in fact just old and beat up. On top of all this disorder, the weather was unrelentingly hot and humid.

Still, there was hope in the air. Because of Bill Clinton's overwhelming popularity among African Americans, even the most cynical tenants—including the people whose cars had been towed—were excited about his visit. Tenant leaders led campaigns to spruce up their buildings' lobbies, hallways, and playgrounds. Tenant patrols went door-to-door asking people to tidy up their living rooms and clean their toilets; in one building, snakes and other strange pets

were confiscated from certain households. And throughout the project, aged flower beds sprang to life.

In the early days of Robert Taylor, the buildings had competed against one another with flower gardens and other beautification projects. This dormant practice was now reborn in anticipation of the president's visit. He obviously couldn't visit all twenty-eight Robert Taylor buildings, and he might have time for just one. But this only heightened the intensity of the competition. A few tenant leaders called in favors with city officials to try to make sure their building was on the president's list. Some of them curried additional favor by turning in drug dealers to the police.

The 5011 building, located on the far south side of Robert Taylor, showed particular enthusiasm. This was fueled by the belief that a new construction project next door to 5011 was in fact the construction of a presidential podium. The tenant leader taxed the local gang twenty-five hundred dollars to fund a wide-scale restoration effort. The building's children were given new clothes and shoes; a mural of historic African-American figures was painted along the building's ground floor; a few particularly civic-minded tenants even wrote speeches, just in case the president called them up to the podium. And families planted rows and rows of flowers in a garden that had seen nothing but trash for years.

By the morning of June 17, 1994, the day of President Clinton's visit, the residents of 5011 were fully ready. But his entourage sped past quickly, without so much as a wave. He gave his speech in another part of Robert Taylor. A few of the tenants in 5011 moaned and groaned, but generally they were satisfied that the president had showed up at all. Parents broke out soda and beer, and their kids caught the spirit and launched a party. After the initial disappointment, no one seemed willing to utter a spiteful word. For a time at least, the community shared a deep spirit of satisfaction, of having

pulled together. Over and over again, you could hear tenants remark that they hadn't seen such solidarity in decades.

Now, a year later, the flower bed outside J.T.'s building stood as a similar sign of hope—and, in light of the imminent demolition of the projects, a sign of proud obstinacy.

The back-to-school party was in full swing. Kids and grown-ups alike loaded their plates with food. A softball game started up, and a crowd of people gathered to watch. I milled about, saying hello to a lot of people I hadn't seen in a while.

Suddenly the sound of gunshots pierced the air, and everyone ran for cover. There were four or five shots, rapid fire, from what sounded like a pistol. Parents grabbed their kids and ducked behind cars or ran for the lobby. Above the blaring music, you could hear women screaming for their children. J.T. hollered for everyone to get down.

I found myself crouching behind a car parked near the building. Beside me were a few of J.T.'s foot soldiers, young men I barely knew. I asked where the shooting was coming from. They immediately pointed up toward the upper floors of the building.

"Niggers are probably high on dope," one of them whispered.

"Or else you got an MC who snuck up in the building. It used to be an MC building before we took it over."

Some distance away I could see a thin, dark-skinned woman staggering toward us across the grassy expanse in front of the building. Her clothes were sloppy, and she was practically falling down, probably either drunk or high. As she came closer, you could hear her talking to herself, most of it gibberish. People started yelling at her to take cover. A few of J.T.'s men shouted nasty names and threw beer bottles at her. It was pretty common for drug dealers to treat drug users with disdain; they often justified their line of work by pointing out that they took money from the most useless members of the community.

Some more shots rang out from above, the bullets kicking up clouds of dirt a few feet from the woman.

"That ain't the MCs firing at us," said the foot soldier beside me. "That's just some nigger who is fucked up and looking to cause trouble."

Finally an older gentleman ran out, grabbed the staggering woman, and hustled her into the lobby. After about ten minutes with no more gunfire, most people felt comfortable enough to come out from their hiding places. Parents and children ran into the building, abandoning the party. The squatters and the hustlers, meanwhile, got back to their food and listened to the music. My heart kept racing for several minutes, but even I wasn't surprised by now that nobody even bothered to call the police.

In the spring of 1996, I learned that I had received a junior fellowship at Harvard's Society of Fellows. I was ecstatic; it was a much-sought-after position, a three-year salaried research post. I went to tell J.T. the good news, and that I would soon be leaving town, although I still planned to maintain my ties to Chicago.

The smells of Ms. Mae's cooking—collard greens, cornbread, and smothered chicken—hit me as I walked in the door. "You still manage to get here right when the food is ready, don't you?" J.T. said with a laugh.

I apologized for missing the last few suburban Black Kings meetings.

"They still think you're the director of communications," he said, laughing again but looking at the TV instead of at me. "There's another meeting next Sunday if you want to come with me."

"Sure," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "That would be great." I explained why I'd been so busy lately. Until I learned of the Har-

yard fellowship. I had been applying for teaching jobs at universities all over the country, including Columbia University in New York.

J.T. interrupted my explanation. "You remember Curtis, that tall, dark boy you met?" He suddenly sat up and began to speak with great enthusiasm. "Curtis is from New Jersey, or at least he has work out there. Hey, what do you think about heading out there with me? I've been wanting to go and see how they do things. He and I have this bet. He says the women are hotter in *his* projects. Says I should come out and see."

I did remember Curtis, a nerdy-looking drug dealer who worked out of the housing projects in Newark. We had exchanged a few words at most when he came to visit J.T. about a year earlier.

"Somehow," I said to J.T., trying to sound appreciative, "I don't think that would be such a good—"

"Yeah, you're probably right. Probably not the best time for us to leave right now, especially with everything that's going on. You need to watch me do my thing, I know." He grew pensive. "I got a couple of big meetings next week, and you probably want to be around for that."

Before I could ask him about these meetings, he had another idea: "You know something? You remember how we talked about how gangs are different across the country?"

I had once told J.T. that gangs in New York and Boston were said to be much smaller than Chicago's gangs, rooted in local neighborhoods as opposed to being part of a citywide wheel. But no one, I told him, had managed to write an in-depth, multi-city study of street gangs.

"I could help you meet people all over the place!" he continued. He stood up to get a beer from the fridge. "We got people we know in L.A., in Las Vegas, St. Louis. Black Kings are nationwide! I mean, you and I could figure out how the whole thing works."

"So you'll be my research assistant!" I said with a laugh, not quite sure what he was proposing.

"No, no! You'll still be writing about *me*. The book will still be about *me*, but this will add a new dimension to it."

"Yes, it would add a lot, but I'd really have to check with my professors. I mean, I'm not sure what's going to happen once I move...."

J.T.'s voice immediately took on a guarded tone. "No, I understand," he said. "I know you got a lot to think about. I'm just saying that I could help you. But yeah, you talk to your professors first. No big thing...."

We sat there, not speaking, eyes on the TV. I kept hoping we'd be interrupted by Ms. Mae calling us for dinner, but we weren't. I didn't even have the energy to muster up a question about J.T.'s busi-ness or his life, as I'd always done previously whenever he sensed that my interests were shifting. Finally a college basketball game came on, and the blare of the crowd and the cheerleaders drowned out the silence between us.

With the demolition of Robert Taylor now formally scheduled to begin within a year, the drug economy in J.T.'s buildings was already faltering. Some of his best customers were tenants, and they were starting to move out. So were a lot of the BK foot soldiers who still lived at home with their moms. (J.T. offered to rent Ms. Mae a home in one of several neighborhoods, and she tried out a few, but she wound up coming back to a cousin's house a few hundred yards from Robert Taylor.) The whole place had also grown thick with police, called in to protect the streams of contractors, engineers, city planners, and other bureaucrats who were plotting the massive demolition.

With less demand for drugs, there was less work for J.T.'s rank-

and-file members. It was in his interest to place these young men in a new gang, since he never knew when he might need their help in the future. Given his standing in the BKs, it was certainly within J.T.'s power to reassign his foot soldiers to other BK factions throughout the city. But he was able to place only a handful at a time, and no more than a few dozen overall. Worse yet, this strategy tended to fail in the long term, since in most cases the host gang wouldn't fully accept the new member.

J.T.'s gang also had a lot of older members, in their thirties and even forties, who were unwilling to accept a transfer, since that typically meant a drop in seniority and, accordingly, income. Some of these men began to leave J.T.'s command altogether, trying to secure positions within other gangs around the city—occasionally, to J.T.'s deep displeasure, within a rival gang.

A few of J.T.'s men traveled as far as Iowa to try to set up shop. I never went along on any of these out-of-state recruiting trips, but judging from the frustration of the BK missionaries who returned to Chicago, this plan wasn't going to work out very well.

J.T. tried to hold things together, but the new economics of his situation conspired against him. He grew lonely, feeling as if he were being abandoned by his own BK family. His sense of paranoia grew even more acute. Whenever I saw him, he immediately began to speculate that the more senior BK defectors were revealing the gang's secrets to rival outfits: where the BKs stored guns and drugs, which cops were open to bribery, which local merchants were willing to launder money.

And then there were the arrests. The federal indictments that had begun to tear apart other gangs were now striking the Black Kings as well. Barry and Otis, two of J.T.'s younger members, had recently been arrested. I wondered how long J.T. would be able to stay free

himself. One night, driving back from one of the suburban gang meetings, he mused that jail might actually be the best of his options since anyone who escaped arrest for too long was suspected of being a snitch and placed himself in real danger on the streets.

Soon after this conversation, I heard that T-Bone had been arrested. He was eventually convicted of trafficking narcotics and sentenced to more than ten years in prison. His prompt transfer to an out-of-state prison fueled speculation that he was testifying against his peers to get a reduced sentence. I tried every avenue I could think of, but I had no luck reaching T-Bone. I eventually heard that he had died in prison, and he became celebrated in death for never having cooperated with the police to sell out other gang members.

For a time I thought that J.T. and I might remain close even as our worlds were growing apart. "Don't worry," I told him, "I'll be coming back all the time." But the deeper I got into my Harvard fellowship, the more time passed between my visits to Chicago, and the more time passed between visits, the more awkward J.T. and I found it to carry on our conversations. He seemed to have grown nostalgic for our early days together, even a bit clingy. I realized that he had come to rely on my presence; he liked the attention and the validation.

I, meanwhile, grew evasive and withdrawn—in large part out of guilt. Within just a few months at Harvard, I began making a name for myself in academia by talking about the inner workings of street gangs. While I hoped to contribute to the national discussion on poverty, I was not so foolish as to believe that my research would specifically benefit J.T. or the tenant families from whom I'd learned so much.

As demolition became a reality, and as J.T.'s gang continued to fall apart, so did our relationship. When I told him that I'd been offered

a job teaching sociology at Columbia University upon completing my Harvard fellowship, he asked me what was wrong with teaching in Chicago. "What about high school?" he said. "Those people need education, too, don't they?"

he breakdown of the gang affected Ms. Bailey as well. When the gang didn't make money, Ms. Bailey didn't make much money either. And with demolition so near, she needed all the money she could get to help the tenants she wanted to help. She paid for day care so single mothers could go look for new apartments. She hired a car service to take tenants on their housing searches. She helped others settle their outstanding electricity bills so they'd be able to get service once they entered the private market.

But as the money ran out, some tenants began to turn on her. Even though the CHA was supposed to provide relocation services, it was Ms. Bailey who had stepped into the breach, for a fee, and so she was the one who now caught the blame. She was widely accused of pocketing the gang's money instead of using it for the tenants.

I had never seen Ms. Bailey cry until the moment she told me about these accusations. "I have lived here for almost my whole life, Sudhir," she said mournfully.

We were sitting in her office on a hot spring day. The old bustle was long gone. It used to be that we couldn't sit and talk for ten minutes before Ms. Bailey was interrupted by a needy tenant; now we had the room to ourselves for well over an hour.

"You've been told before that you work too closely with the gangs," I said. "Why does it bother you now?"

"Out there they don't have anybody," she said. "Out there they think they can make it on their own, but . . ." She tried and tried, but she wasn't able to finish her sentence.

I wanted to say something worthwhile but couldn't think of anything. "They'll . . . they'll be okay," I sputtered. "Hell, they lived through the projects."

"But you see, Sudhir, I know that and you know that, but *they* sometimes forget. It's like I told you many times: What scares *you* ain't what scares *them*. When they go to a new store or they have to stand at a bus stop in a place they never been to before, *that's* what scares them. I wanted to help them feel okay. And just when they need me, I can't be there for them."

"You can still do things—" I started to say. But I stopped. The pain on her face was evident, and nothing I could say would console her. I just sat quietly with her until we'd finished our coffee.

I saw Ms. Bailey a few more times, but she was never again the same. For health reasons she moved into her nephew's home in the middle of West Englewood, a poor black community about two miles from the projects. I visited her there. She had several ailments, she told me, but it was hard to sort out one from the other. "I stopped going to the doctor's," she said. "One more test, one more drug, one more thing I got to pay for. And for *what*? To live *here*?"

She waved her hands out at the miles and miles of poor tracts surrounding her nephew's house, tracts that held far too few of the people from her old high-rise home, the people who'd once given her life meaning.

Winter in Chicago comes fast, and it comes hard. The cold delivers a wallop, making you shudder longer than you'd expect.

The first blasts of chilling wind off the lake feel like an enemy. It was a late Sunday morning in November 1998, and I was waiting outside J.T.'s building one last time. About a half dozen Robert Taylor buildings had already been torn down, and his was due to

demolition within a year. Nearby businesses had started to close, too. The whole place was starting to feel like a ghost town. I had changed as well. Gone were the tie-dyed shirts and the ponytail, replaced by the kind of clothes befitting an edgy young Ivy League professor. And also a leather briefcase.

I leaned against my car, stamping my feet to keep warm while waiting for J.T. I was just about to get back into the car and turn on the heater when I saw his Malibu charge down Federal Street.

J.T. had called the night before to request a meeting. In his characteristically ambiguous way, he wouldn't divulge any details. But he sounded excited. He did tell me that the federal indictments were probably over and that he wouldn't be arrested. I wanted to know how and why he had escaped arrest, but I didn't have the guts to ask. He'd always been secretive about his contacts in law enforcement. He also asked a few questions about what kind of research I'd be doing in New York. I mentioned some possible ideas, but they were vague at best.

We greeted each other with a handshake and a smile. I told him he looked like he'd put on a little weight. He agreed; between his work and the needs of his growing children, he said, there wasn't as much time to exercise. He pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. There were several names and phone numbers printed in J.T.'s scratchy handwriting. Among the names was that of Curtis, the gang leader in Newark we'd talked about before.

"You should call these people," J.T. said. "I told Curtis that you wanted to see how things worked out there. He'll take care of you. But Billy Jo, that's the one who really knows what's happening in New York. Here, give him this."

J.T. had often talked about his friends who ran drug-dealing operations in New York. But what with the federal indictments, the

demolition of Robert Taylor, and my own career moves, I had pretty much forgotten about them. Also, given how things had turned out with me and J.T.—it was pretty obvious by now that I wasn't going to write his biography—I was surprised that he'd go out of his way to put me in touch with his contacts back east.

He took out another sheet of paper, tightly folded over in fours, the creases a bit worn, as if he'd been carrying it in his pocket for a while. His hands were so cold that they shook as he unfolded it. He gave the paper to me and blew on his hands to warm them up.

"Go ahead, nigger, read it," he said. "Hurry up, it's cold!"

I began to read. It was addressed to Billy Jo: *Billy, Sudhir is coming out your way. Take care of the nigger. . . . My eyes scanned down and caught a phrase in the middle of the page: He's with me.*

I could feel myself breaking into a wide smile. J.T. reached into his car and pulled out two beers.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for another big research project just yet," I said.

"Oh, yeah?" he said, handing me one of the beers. "What else are you going to do? You can't fix nothing, you never worked a day in your life. The only thing you know how to do is hang out with niggers like us."

I nearly choked on my beer when he summarized my capacities so succinctly—and, for the most part, accurately.

J.T. leaned back on the car, looking up at the high-rises in front of us. "You think niggers will survive out there?" he asked. "You think they'll be all right when they leave here?"

"Not sure. Probably. I mean, everything changes. You just have to be ready, I guess."

"You hungry?" he asked.

"Starving."

"Let's go down to Seventy-ninth. There's a new soul-food place."

"Sounds good," I said, chugging the beer quickly. "Why don't you drive?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, jumping into the car, "and I got one for you! What would you do if you were me? I got this new bunch of guys that think they know everything. . . ."

He began telling me about his latest management dilemma with a gang he was running in Roseland, a neighborhood where a lot of the Robert Taylor families were relocating. As he spoke, I became lost in his voice. His steady and assured monologue comforted me; for a few moments anyway, I could feel as though little had changed, even though everything had. He turned on some rap music, opened up another beer, and kept on talking. The car screeched out of the parking lot, J.T. waved to a few women pushing strollers in the cold, and we sped down Federal Street.

Within a few years, J.T. grew tired of running a gang. He managed his cousin's dry-cleaning business, and he started up a barbershop, which failed. He had put away enough savings, in property and cash, to supplement his lower income. Once in a while, he did consulting work for Black Kings higher-ups who tried to revive their citywide hold on the drug economy. But this effort never came to fruition, and with the crack market severely depleted, Chicago's gangland remains fragmented, with some neighborhoods having little if any gang activity.

I still see J.T. now and then when I'm in Chicago. Although we've never discussed it explicitly, I don't sense that he begrudges my success as an academic, nor does he seem bitter about his own life. "Man, as long as I'm not behind bars and breathing," he told me,

"every day is a good day." It would be hard to call us friends. And I sometimes wonder if we ever were.

But he was obviously a huge part of my life. For all the ways in which I had become a rogue sociologist, breaking conventions and flouting the rules, perhaps the most unconventional thing I ever did was embrace the idea that I could learn so much, absorb so many lessons, and gain so many experiences at the side of a man who was so far removed from my academic world. I can still hear J.T.'s voice when I'm on the streets far away from Chicago, somewhere in the unruly Paris suburbs or the ghettos of New York, hanging around and listening to people's stories.

Many of the names and some of the identities in this book have been changed. I also disguised some locations and altered the titles of certain organizations. But all the people, places, and institutions are real; they are not composites, and they are not fictional.

Whenever possible, I based the material on written field notes. Some of the stories, however, have been reconstructed from memory. While memory isn't a perfect substitute for notes, I have tried my best to reproduce conversations and events as faithfully as possible.