

## *Someone to Watch Over Me*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then J.T. grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me away so I couldn't watch. But out of the corner of my eye, I could see that a few tenants finally came over to help Brass, while the gang mem-

bers just stood over him doing nothing. J.T. held me up, as if to comfort me. I tried instead to support my weight on his car.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One cold November night, J.T. invited me to a meeting at a small storefront Baptist church. An ex-gangster named Lenny Duster would be teaching young people about the rights, responsibilities, and power of voting. The next election, while a full year away, would place in office a great many state legislators as well as city aldermen. Lenny ran a small organization called Pride, which helped mediate gang wars. About a hundred young Black Kings attended the meeting, held in a small room at the rear of the church. They were quiet and respectful, although they had the look of teenagers who'd been told that attendance was mandatory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But that's what I'm saying." The woman eyed Shorry-Lee curiously. "I already signed up. I'm going to vote in the next primary." Shorry-Lee was puzzled. He looked over to the three other BKs. They were toting spiral-bound notebooks in which they "signed up" potential voters. But it seemed that neither Lenny nor J.T. had told them that there was an actual registration form and that registrars had to be licensed.

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

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

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

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

"Young man," the woman continued, "have you ever voted?" Shorry-Lee looked at the others, who seemed quite interested in his answer. Then he looked at me. He seemed embarrassed. "No," he said. "I ain't voted yet. But I will."

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

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

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

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

"You have to be eighteen," the woman said with a gentle smile.

"How old are you?"

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

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

"Okay," Shorry-Lee shrugged, defeated.

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

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

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

J.T. hadn't told me to say this. But I felt so bad for Shorry-Lee that I wanted to give him an out. I figured I could talk to him later, when we were alone, and explain how registration actually worked. Shorry-Lee gazed out silently through the gallery's chain-link fence.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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

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



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

"How does that work?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't lie to me, nigger."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Huh? Is he with you then, nigger?"

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, nigger, you didn't *think*," J.T. started walking inside. "Like I said, you're with me or you're with someone else. You decide." Inside, I could see Autry, giggling at me. "Come in, boy!" he yelled. "Come in, little baby! You scared?"

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

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

"You pissed at me?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was a little cool toward me the next few times I saw him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Boy, get me a chair."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You ever get hurt before?"

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

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

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

"You wanted this, right?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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