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Rockwood Revisited: More Exciting Tales from the "Hood"

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ROCKWOOD REVISITED:
MORE EXCITING TALES
FROM THE "HOOD"

James A. Clay, M.F.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

ABSTRACT

The following essay and two short stories introduce a sequel to the book, *The Rockwood Files: Tales from the Hood*, which I wrote and published in 2002. The working title of the sequel is *Rockwood Revisited*. The original work is a collection of inspirational short stories that tell how several courageous inner city residents struggled to rise above obstacles they faced in search of a better life. Set in the fictional neighborhood known as Rockwood Square on Chicago's Westside, the stories chronicle life experiences of several of the neighborhood's past and present residents as seen through the eyes of lifelong resident and recovering drug addict, Tyrone "T" Bates.

Rockwood Revisited will explore some of the same themes as the original tales, only through different eyes. The stories will be based on discussions and observations from a recent visit I made to the neighborhood Rockwood Square is based on, as well as the myriad of memories the visit conjured up. All of the stories are fictionalized accounts of real people and situations. The over-arching theme addresses life in this inner-city neighborhood and the issues the residents face and deal with – some unique, some no different than those of any other American city neighborhood. But these stories will also once again seek to shed light on why some residents

flourish in spite of their humble beginnings while others succumb or fail to rise above them.

The stories will span several decades beginning in the 1950's when African Americans first began moving into the neighborhood, and extend through the end of the millennium at which time the demography had transitioned one hundred percent.

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MORE EXCITING STORIES
FROM THE HOOD

James A. Clay, MFA

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Lindenwood College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I wrote and self-published a book of short stories entitled *The Rockwood Files: Tales from the Hood*. Later, I decided to take writing classes and work on a Masters degree in Creative Writing. It's not lost on me that most normal people would have accomplished those two tasks in the opposite order, but I've never been accused of being normal. Interestingly, my MFA degree is being obtained exactly thirty years after I received my only other college degree, a BS degree in History and Political Science from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. Lots of things have happened in my life in the interim, including a twenty one year career in federal law enforcement. In the essay which follows, I discuss in greater detail the paths I've taken that lead me to this academic achievement.

This project consists of the aforementioned essay and two short stories that derive from the very colorful years I spent growing up on the West side of Chicago in the 1960's and '70's.

ROCKWOOD REVISITED

History reveals that the first non-Native American settler in Chicago was Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, a Haitian of African and French descent, who settled on the Chicago River in the 1770's and married a local Potawatomi woman. I recall this little known fact becoming a great source of pride for me and my fellow African American classmates when middle-school History teacher extraordinaire, John Delaney, first brought it to the attention of our eighth grade class in the late 1960's. Delaney, a white man, taught me, and I suspect the same to be true of my classmates, more about black history and politics than anyone before or since. The balding, full-bearded, bespectacled neo-hippie, was all about apprising his students of the "news behind the news" - the stuff that wasn't being written about in our dated, tattered history books, nor reported in the city's two major daily newspapers.

If not for Mr. Delaney, I might never have learned the details behind the 1969 massacre of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on Chicago's Westside by a coalition of federal and local law enforcement officers. Nor would I have gained insight into the discriminatory housing practices of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), to which my own family fell victim. He taught us to always examine the source of information and to assess his or her biases. Delaney was one of many colorful Chicagoans that helped shape my world view in my early years growing up on the city's tough Westside.

The lyrics from an old Jim Croce song began: “On the *Southside* of Chicago, the meanest part of town...” but you’d be hard-pressed to convince natives of the city’s Westside that its streets weren’t at least as mean. While the Southside had pockets of black culture and pseudo affluence by virtue of it being the part of town first inhabited by blacks migrating from the south, the Westside had shallower roots and a growing legacy of pervasive poverty. The Southside had Hyde Park, South Shore, Englewood and other well established middle and upper middle-class neighborhoods. It had thriving black businesses and entertainment spots. The Westside was more transient. Neighborhoods were constantly changing. In the span of a few decades, African Americans trekked west behind a generation of fleeing whites from near downtown, clear out to the suburb of Oak Park, where at one point it was made crystal clear by its town officials that the trek would end right there at the border that separated a blighted inner-city neighborhood from a well-established upscale suburb.

I was a freshman at Lane Tech High School, Chicago’s preeminent public secondary school located on the city’s Northside, the first time I put pen to paper unforced, with any serious literary intent. Having just completed a perfunctory English assignment early, with some degree of unanticipated satisfaction, I decided to continue with a bit of creative dabble in the ensuing idle time I had earned. The resulting fulfillment I experienced from my impromptu product – a parody of one of my favorite cartoons – was not

roundly shared by the handful of readers I dared to share it with, including the teacher, thus ending for the moment, my fledgling creative writing aspirations.

Fast forward four years to my freshman English class at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. A laid-back Literature professor who donned “Lenonesque” round spectacles, and recited Shakespearean soliloquies at the drop of a hat, announced he was about to read before the entire class an essay I wrote on some topic I no longer recall. “Now that reads,” he announced upon completion, as I had held my breath hoping not to be publicly humiliated by a blistering repudiation of my humble submission. Even though he went on to dissect each phrase and syntax with surgeon-like precision, the declaration “that reads,” however vague and lacking in specifics, echoed in my mind and buoyed my confidence and interest in writing.

But it would be several more years before I would put pen to paper – or fingers to keyboard, as it were - to once again make an attempt at writing something that might entertain others and serve as some sort of artistic catharsis for an otherwise “artless” life. The timing was peculiar, since I was working a fifty-hour week and raising two teenage children who were approaching the pinnacle of their adolescent social and athletic activities. Nevertheless, I managed to produce a book of short stories during the ensuing two years, loosely based on characters and events from my childhood in

Chicago. *The Rockwood Files: Tales from the Hood*, was the fulfillment of one of my life's goals – to write and publish a book. It didn't matter if it ever sold a single copy (I actually sold about 500 copies); I just wanted it on my bookcase so that someday my grandkids might at least pick it up, page through it, and have fond thoughts of the old man. Mission accomplished! Although, I wish I could say it received rave reviews; in fact, for the longest time, even I thought it sucked. It seemed I couldn't read a passage without tensing my facial muscles and shaking my head disappointedly. I used to joke, if I ever wanted someone to disappear, I would simply give them a copy of my book to read and it seemed they would never be heard from again. The age-old literary caution "show don't tell," resonated in my mind incessantly whenever I got up enough nerve to read passages from my dubious work of art.

Recently, I have been more forgiving of myself as I occasionally meander through the pages of my impulsive work. In fact, I now view it as a very ambitious project for a guy who really had very little prior instruction in creative writing. The following is a synopsis of what compelled me to launch the project:

I always had a fascination with the city I grew up in; especially with people from my old neighborhood – Rockwell Gardens. I gave a three-pronged explanation in the book concerning this attraction. First, I expressed a

need to gauge my own progress against those I grew up with - I guess to feel some measure of accomplishment and perhaps vindication for the relatively rigid way I was raised. Second, I had a desire to reconnect with those who may still live in the neighborhood and to hopefully hear some compelling life stories that might be fodder for future books. And finally, I wanted to conduct some kind of non-scientific, rudimentary assessment of what enabled some people from the old neighborhood to rise above their humble, impoverished, beginnings to become "successful" in life, while others succumbed. I had my own theories and wanted to put them to the test.

I quickly decided to make the book one of short stories versus writing a novel, reasoning that, with this format, as soon as I ran out of time, as I knew I would because of my life's more pressing issues, I would simply finish up with the story I was writing and call it a day. This turned out to be a critical decision because sure enough, after writing six short stories and some in-between dialog, the pressures of work and family came to bear in full force and slammed shut my tenuous window of opportunity. The stories were told in both first and third person, emerging from the author's reflective conversations with the illusory 'T', a long time resident of the fictitious community of *Rockwood Square*. 'T' had seen them come and go and knew where the bodies were buried. The interspersed conversations between 'T' and the author lead the reader into the succeeding story. While some of the tales

are pure fiction, others are based on real life events that have been redacted and embellished, if not totally gutted and refurbished.

After ending my efforts to write additional stories, I began months of half-baked attempts at being published and or obtaining a literary agent. I quickly realized this was no business for the thin-skinned, and after getting several cold shoulders from New York publishing houses and literary agents, I decided I had to try a different course. I began considering self-publishing and something called "subsidiary" publishing which simply means, you pay most of the cost up front of having your books published in return for retaining a much larger percentage of any book sales. These were two of the limited options open to unknown, ambitious, literary hacks, like me. In the interest of time and severely bruised ego, I opted for the latter. A few months and a few thousand later, I had my published book and two hundred additional start-up copies. At first blush, the pride I felt was like no other I had ever experienced. However, after a closer examination of the editing work and page layouts, I began feeling like I had taken a Joe Frazier roundhouse to the stomach. I came close to tears and was even reluctant to attend my first planned book signing in the Central West End. But I bucked up and dealt with the frustration.

So, as a discredited baseball steroid cheat once blathered, "I'm not here to talk about the past" ...but, then again, I guess I am. This is a brief history of how I began writing and as it turned out, a worthwhile exercise to help rekindle the nearly quenched embers of my writing career.

Back to Chi-Town

I returned to Chicago recently for some additional creative inspiration and to meet with a friend I hadn't seen in over twenty years. I couldn't resist driving to the old neighborhood on the Westside once again and taking a stroll down my old street. As I walked, I recalled that my family moved to West End Street, as the name suggests, near the city's western border, in early 1968, between the assassinations of Dr. King and then Democratic presidential front-runner, Senator Bobby Kennedy. Those two events combined with the Vietnam War and the infamous protest activity during the Democratic National Convention held in Chicago that year, defined the times. I recall looking up at the eastern sky one April evening following Dr. King's assassination and seeing it ablaze, reflecting the fury of bands of angry insurgents, grieving the beloved civil rights leaders' demise. Some tried to distinguish between displays of "righteous indignation," and random, opportunistic looting engaged in by apolitical hooligans who mindlessly ransacked and torched neighborhood establishments that would never return. In the end I don't think it really mattered. Admittedly, many of the businesses were once owned by entrepreneurial predators who for many years ripped-off their impoverished patrons with over-priced, inadequate insurance policies, cheap gaudy clothing, defective appliances, rancid meat and withered produce. Nevertheless, the unbridled mayhem went a long ways towards "slicing off" the proverbial noses of thousands of indigent local residents who

would end up walking or commuting several intrepid miles, traversing a plethora of local gang boundaries: Supreme Gangsters, Vice Lords, Black Soul Nation, etc., to acquire the necessities of life. As in other political protests, the positive impact made by sincere adherents was diminished by those with less commendable motives.

I strolled through the blighted streets curiously and cautiously, glancing at my watch periodically, making sure my meandering ended well before the western sky darkened, anticipating the added dangers the night would bring. I gazed up at the boarded third floor windows of a burned out gray-stone building. Tammy Washington used to live there. She was known for her thigh-high red leather boots and swishing peek-a-boo mini skirts. Every boy in Rockwood had tried to land there at one time or another. I suspect a fair number were successful – I wasn't one of them.

My gaze was abruptly yanked back to earth where a snarling, jet-black Pit Bull with demon red eyes, raised its front paws to the top of a five-foot chain-link fence threatening to thrust its muscular body over at me. Instinct forced me backwards as my heart raced like a fleeing felon. Composing myself, I moved quickly past the only bulwark between me and the scowling menace. Cautiously monitoring my nemesis during my retreat resulted in me bumping into a peculiar passing woman. Her bulging jaundiced eyes stared up

at me menacingly, as her dark, stubby hands lie firmly planted on her wide hips as she awaited an apology.

“I’m sorry...that dog scared the hell out of me and I wasn’t look...”

Her glare eased and her breathing slowed, as she dropped her hands to her side. “Aw, he can’t get over that fence...but don’t go inside – he’ll eat yo’ ass up,” she said, laughing deviously, revealing a huge tongue piercing. “Hey, you look familiar,” she slurred, scrutinizing me through squinted eyes. I waited as she tapped on her chin with stubby index finger, void of any nail length or polish. Although I didn’t recognize her, I suspected she might have a better chance of remembering me since, in all modesty, time had been kinder to me, and I might have borne a greater likeness to a thirty year-old memory. Suddenly, she was struck with an apparent revelation.

“You look like this nigger I met up at the club last week. What’s yo’ name?”

“Uh, it’s Jay.”

“Jay what? You married? She boldly plowed ahead.

“Uh, yeah, yeah I am. Look, I think you got me confused with somebody else – I’m not from around here,” I responded awkwardly, just wanting to quickly escape her discomfoting presence.

“Naw, you don’t look like nobody from ‘round here – you look like one of them rich niggers from the suburbs. Watch yo’self,” she warned, sizing me up as I slowly backed away. “These niggers ‘round here’ll bust you upside yo’ head and take all yo’ shit.”

“I appreciate the warning – nice meeting you,” I said as I turned and walked away, trying not to make it look too obvious that I was in a hurry to get away from her. I could feel her curious gaze following me like an intent stalker as I passed several houses, but I didn’t dare turn to confirm my suspicions. I continued down the same street uneventfully another two blocks before concluding I had seen enough and decided to cross the street and head back to my car. As I passed a large brick apartment complex a voice called out from the shadows.

“Yo,’ blood, won’t you hold tight a minute?” A medium-sized male silhouette limped hurriedly towards me, causing me a great deal of anxiety. As he stepped out of the shadows, our eyes met, and almost instantly curious smiles engulfed our faces.

“Eddie?” I queried, after a few awkward moments.

“Peanuts!” He bellowed out my dreaded, defunct nickname from years gone-by. I reached for his hand, he by passed my offering in favor of a robust man-hug.

Eddie Rogers a.k.a. Blackbird, was once described by a concerned resident of the neighborhood as a “lost soul.” Eddie was a survivor. He survived the sixties’ riots, participating in his share of looting: the Robert Hall clothing store, Kroger’s’ grocery, and various other neighborhood establishments, bringing his ill-gotten wares back to the block to sale at “super discount” prices. He survived police beatings – once having his skull cracked so hard by the bully club of one of Chicago’s finest, it sounded like a ripe coconut being whacked with a hammer. He survived the seventies drug culture, sampling cocaine, LSD and PCP, before mellowing out as a ‘sensible’ pot-head. He survived three stints in Illinois state prisons for drug related offenses. But perhaps most impressive, he survived the very strong temptation to just give up. And in spite of all of his admitted dumb mistakes, bad breaks, and heartaches, Eddie was still standing in the middle of life’s ring, slightly punch-drunk, but taking jabs at whatever foe crossed his path.

“Eddie my man, what it be like?” I inquired in outdated idiom, as we continued to grasp each others’ hand.

“Damn you look good, dude. What you been doin’ to stay lookin’ so young? He asked as he sized me up from head to toe and back again. I hadn’t seen Eddie for at least twenty years, but I had been kept apprised of his very colorful antics over the years, by a mutual friend. Eddie was only a couple of years older than me but his tough skin, puffy eyes, and slightly slumped posture, portrayed a man much older. His completely gray mane was cropped close, masking the effects of male-pattern balding, while his pocked face was clean-shaven. He wore an outdated brown and rust colored plaid shirt and dark ill-fitting corduroy pants that struggled to restrain a burgeoning beer belly. I recalled how Eddie used to pride himself on his appearance; his afro neatly fluffed when not tucked away in French braids; trimmed sideburns, and always adorned in the latest fashions. We stood and reminisced naively as the sky turned a dangerous black; then we finally ended our conversation and went our separate ways into the night with exchanged numbers and promises. Somehow, I knew I had found the inspiration for some new *Tales from the Hood*.

Thus, I embark on a mission to create a sequel to *The Rockwood Files: Tales from the Hood*, entitled: *Rockwood Revisited*; with new short stories based on characters and situations from my old neighborhood.

Me and the Boys

What I loved most about the warm summer nights I spent growing up in Chicago, was the untapped possibilities that dangled in the moist air each time we gathered on the Johnson's concrete front porch to plot our evening. There was a potential for great and exciting fun that teased and titillated, and caused our young hearts to beat with great anticipation of mischief and romance. And if those hopes were not realized, as they usually weren't, the night would end with a meal at the new McDonalds or the always acceptable backup, White Castle. The anticipation reached its peak just before midnight, but then began to wane precipitously as the reality of lacking funds or transportation set in. But on those nights as well as in other endeavors we sought to explore, it was better to have had hope than to have languished in our poverty, void of dreams as was the case with many in our neighborhood.

As usual, the night began with humor – four or five of us “signifying,” mercilessly shredding each other's, as well as family member's, character's to pieces: “Yo' momma's so fat, she had to get her own zip code,” someone would snipe.

“Oh yeah?” yo' momma lips so big, she need a paint brush to put her lipstick on,” another would respond. And on it went until someone suggested purchasing some alcohol. Before the oldest of our group reached eighteen, this required a trek up to Madison Street to find a wino hanging out near a liquor

store, and slipping him a couple of dollars to go in and “cop” for us. Cheap wine was not just the drink of choice, but the drink of financial necessity: *Ripple*, *Annie Green Springs*, *Boone’s Farm*, *Richard’s (Wild Irish Rose)*, were among our favorites – all rot-gut liquor, guaranteed to make you puke if you drank too much - and we often did. Once lathered up, we circled a two block radius on foot, hooting at anything in a skirt, while destroying any chance we might have of gaining some serious attention from the objects of our lust. Then we settled down and began the tall-tales about the “chicks” we conquered or could have conquered, or were hot on the trail of. This went on until the last tired souls decided they had “partied” enough and staggered home.

We weren’t your typical bunch of inner city hooligans – especially those who were in the vaunted “inner circle,” which included guys like Victor Morris, who weighed over three hundred pounds at the youthful age of seventeen. Despite his weight, or maybe because of it, Victor was the funniest guy I ever knew. He could adlib dead-on imitations of stars like Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Kirk Douglass and Bill Cosby. He never ceased to entertain us with his own unique brand of side-splitting humor. But more impressive, Vic was extremely well-read. Although he struggled as a student, and ultimately achieved a GED, he read voraciously and was conversant on almost any topic. Vic didn’t live in the neighborhood but came over to visit relatives at least once a week, and when he did, it was like the block came

alive. We flocked to the familiar concrete front porch anticipating a day filled with insults, humor and enlightenment.

Years later Vic and I became roommates while attending college in Milwaukee. Among his many talents, Vic fancied himself to be quite the cook, and I must admit, most of the time he wasn't bad. He could cook anything from a juicy steak dinner to a soul food medley of fried chicken, greens and mashed potatoes. But I'll never forget the time he decided to prepare an ethnic delicacy we had both grown up eating – kidneys and rice. I recalled seeing the frozen organs sitting in the sink thawing one morning before I left for school. It took me back to the days when my grandmother prepared them in Chicago; I smiled as I stared at them and looked forward to having some when I returned that evening.

As I arrived home that evening I was met at the screen door of our apartment by a putrid and vaguely familiar odor. I entered the house and walked down the dark hall leading to the kitchen where the odor became so strong, I was forced to hold my nose. As I entered the kitchen I looked at the stove and spotted a large black skillet containing two dark oval-shaped objects swimming in grease. I looked over at the kitchen table where my chunky roommate sat wearing a sheepish grin, fork in one hand, knife in the other.

“What the hell...” I began.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” he interrupted, pausing to finish chewing. “I forgot the cardinal rule of cooking kidneys: first, you must boil the piss out of them.” We laughed until we cried for the next several minutes, before opening all of the windows to rid the house of the strong smell of urine. That was classic Victor Morris.

Another member of the inner circle was Rodney Pickford - a gangly, cap-wearing, Tiparillo smoker. Rod was the philosopher of the group; the guy with big plans to make it some day. He was the oldest of all of my friends, some four years older than me, but I used to love hanging out with him because we thought a lot alike and enjoyed a lot of the same things especially when it came to music, women, and alcohol. It was the two of us who introduced drinks like *Hop'n Gator* and *Champale* - sweet tasting beer-wine amalgams - to the group. We were also the only true jazz enthusiasts for a long time before eventually enticing other members of the group to expand their musical palate from an exclusive diet of R&B and Soul. And once again, we tended to lead the way when it came to our unique and youthful lust for women - both being “leg men.”

Rod was the first one of us to own a car. His 1968 green Dodge Charger with half vinyl, half hard top, became legendary in the neighborhood. It sometimes accommodated as many as seven squished ebony torsos on a hot

summer day on the way to Twelfth Street Beach or Old Town, a trendy north side hangout for the hip and wanna-be hip. Rod once held the group spellbound with a tale of how he treated himself to a local brothel visit for his eighteenth birthday. Each of us pressed the characteristically vague trendsetter for details of his alleged exploits in an attempt to authenticate his claims. But all we could coax out of him was more vaguery.

“Umm boy, you shoulda been there. She was a real pro,” he chortled while vigorously rubbing his hands together.

“So Rod, how long did it last?” One inquiring mind wanted to know.

“I wore her out,” he replied with a look of great accomplishment, evoking a unanimous groan of disbelief from the audience. Rod always had a shroud of mystery about him. One minute he would be there laughing and having a good time with everybody, then he would slip away undetected until someone noticed his absence. None of us really knew how to contact Rod at any given time. We only saw him when he came to visit his aunt who lived in the neighborhood. Sometimes we would be standing around talking and someone would spot the green Charger and say, “Here comes the Rod.” And a few minutes later, Rod would emerge from around the corner sporting his trademark blue jean jacket, well-worn floppy fatigue hat and prescription Ray Ban sunglasses.

One of the highlights of summer in our Westside neighborhood was softball games in the long narrow alley that ran adjacent to my bedroom window which we dubbed "Alley Stadium." We enjoyed years of athletic ecstasy smacking a sixteen-inch clincher off the sides of the brick apartment building walls and metal garage doors that enclosed our humble and sometimes perilous ball field. The perils were best exemplified by some of the zany exploits of another inner-circle crony we nicknamed "Deadeye, because of his lazy left eye." "Deadeye" aka, Ricky Cotton was at once a gangbanger wanna-be and a loveable misfit. He amused us with tales of how the local gang chieftains were trying to "draft" him into their tribes. While Ricky could display a hardened appearance, featuring his lazy left-eyed, contrived stern expression, and his head frequently adorned with a 'doo rag,' he was still a gentle and caring soul to us who knew him well.

To accentuate the dangers of our beloved Alley Stadium, Ricky provided us with two of the most memorable moments I can recall from our many years of his colorful antics. The first began innocently enough with Rick chasing down a drive hit over his head near the jagged metal garage door in what would be considered straight-away center field. Rick quickly tracked the ball down, but after reaching behind a jagged tear in the door to retrieve it, he instead presented a bloody finger dangling from his left hand, courtesy of the centerfield menace.

The second incident occurred one spring when we decided we would stray from our traditional clincher and experiment with some real baseball - complete with gloves and an official league ball, but still with garbage can tops for bases and Alley Stadium's glorious concrete "turf" in lieu of the green stuff...and there in lied the rub. The bases were loaded and Vic Morris was at the plate - a right-handed dead-pull hitter. Playing third base was the nimble-footed, albeit clumsy-handed, Rick Cotton, playing at a depth meant only for those with a death wish!

You could almost see it coming. Big Vic straddled the make-shift batter's box to the left of the rusted disc, doubling as home plate. He indicated to the runners they would all be coming home. "Crack!" Vic smacked a hard one hopper off the rugged concrete surface headed dauntingly towards the hot corner. With reaction time truncated by proximity, the intrepid third baseman reacted in what seemed like slow motion, cupping his glove towards the anticipated arrival point of the ball. But much to his dismay, the well-stroked, surface energized projectile, rose from the pavement a second faster and an inch higher than the intended fielder had placed his target, resulting in a violent collision which sprung a red volcanic eruption from the nose of our beloved Deadeye. He crumbled to the ground amidst a course of stunned "oohs!" We rushed to his aid as he lay writhing in pain on the ground, blood pouring from between his hands and nose.

The next day, roast master Vic and others wasted no time lampooning the hapless, bandaged-nosed victim as he sat on the concrete porch trying to fend off his own laughter and shaking his head in disbelief, amidst the hilarity at his expense. That's the way it was with our gang, if you lived through an incident, you could count on being the butt of a brutal ribbing.

Brothers Pete and Lonnie Wilson were fringe members of the inner circle – Pete more out than in and the reverse was true of Lonnie. They were complete opposites. Pete was the braggadocious younger of the two, constantly boasting of his prowess in everything from sexual encounters to sports we never even heard of. Lonnie was quiet and analytical, picking his spots to retaliate when taunted by others in the group. He withstood a lot but when he finally recoiled, he could sting like an asp. The Wilson boys were perhaps better known for their relationship to one Katie Wilson, their gorgeous, youthful looking divorced mother. None of us could figure out why Miss Wilson hadn't remarried or at least had a steady man. She often seemed lonely and clung to her boys, making them come in early on weekends to sit and watch television with her. To add to the boys' embarrassment, Miss Wilson liked to drink a little on weekends. We could always tell when she had a little too much to drink; she would leave their third floor apartment and saunter down the alley to get the boys rather than yell for them from her bedroom window. During those times, she would hang around and tell us embarrassing

stories about Lonnie and Pete, much to their chagrin. They tried desperately to hasten her departure.

There was an unwritten code among our group that tacitly covered current girlfriends, sisters to a lesser degree – and certainly mothers just based on what we referred to as “G.P.”- General Principle. Until one hot August night, the latter had never been broached outside of exchanges of knowing glances when she would appear in an especially revealing outfit, or had been drinking a bit too much, as she had that night. All six of us were sitting on the curb at the edge of the alley just shooting the bull, when she appeared out of nowhere. I immediately smelled alcohol.

“Hey guys, what you up to?” she sang. Pete and Lonnie immediately jumped to their feet, sensing their mother’s condition and began walking towards her. Pete gently took hold of her right arm.

“Hold on guys, you don’t have to come home right away, I just want to sit and rap with you gentlemen for a few minutes – get some insight from the younger generation. You know you guys aren’t that much younger than me anyway,” she giggled, stumbling slightly.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s go home old lady,” Pete said jokingly as he pulled slightly on his mother’s arm.

“Let go of my arm, boy!” Ms. Wilson yelled at Pete. “I’ll go when I’m good and damn ready,” she scolded. As she jerked away from her son’s grasp, she stumbled and fell right in Rod’s lap, her short skirt riding high up on her shapely thighs. “I’m still your mother and don’t you forget it,” she slurred as she scrambled to right herself.

Pete backed away looking stunned and embarrassed, while Lonnie simply hung his head with the rest of us and looked away. We felt their profound humiliation. “Let’s go boys,” she ordered, a bit discomfited from her stumble. “Don’t you guys stay out too late and stay out of trouble” she called over her shoulder as she walked down the alley behind her two mortified sons.

We waited until they were well out of sight before the first comment was made. It predictably came from Rod. “Man! Did you see that? He asked, with his hands out stretched. “Her butt landed right in my lap.”

“Damn that. Did you see how that skirt came up? I had the best angle of anybody, and boy let me tell you, I saw plenty,” Vic chimed in.

“Dude, that even made my dead eye open wide,” Rick joked.

“Man, I can’t even imagine how embarrassed Pete and Lonnie must be feeling right now,” I said, trying to draw the conversation back to a more wholesome tone.

“I tell you what, that is one fine-ass woman,” Vic proclaimed.

Rod responded, “Man, let me tell you, if circumstances had been a little different I might of...”

“You might of what? I challenged. “Come on man, that ain’t cool,” I cautioned.

Rod stroked his goatee as I had seen him do countless times just before firing off a very provocative question. I could feel it coming, we were about to enter into the most challenging round of “Would you hit that?” we had ever engaged in.

“So alright bro,” he began, still rubbing his face and lowering his voice to a raspy, guttural tone. “So, you trying to tell me, under the right circumstances...you wouldn’t knock that out?”

I paused a moment, running my hand over my short afro as I stared up at the night sky. I considered her very attractive face; I contemplated her

luscious, curvaceous body. I replayed her sexy walk and her sultry voice through my vivid memory track. Then I thought about Lonnie and Pete. And though they weren't my closest friends, they were still my boys.

"Naw, man...I couldn't do it," I responded, as I stiffened my jaw and shook my head slowly, but convincingly. "I could never look them cats in the eye again," I added.

"How 'bout you Cotton?" Rod inquired as he switched his quizzical gaze to Rick who was stooping near the curb but looking Rod straight in the eyes.

"Man, you a dog," Rick chuckled. "You a straight-up d.o.g."

"Yeah, whatever," Rod responded, getting a bit flustered. "I don't believe ya'll niggers. What about you big man? Don't tell me you wouldn't hit it."

"Well, old buddy," Vic began slowly, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his large jeans. "I think I'd have to go with the Nut and Cotton on this one." Then he suddenly began tearing into Rod. "Man, that's some cold shit! What the hell's the matter with you, ain't you got no scruples? Does your Johnson always have the final say? How you gon' screw yo' friend's momma? I don't care how fine she is, you can't be doin' no shit like that."

Everybody started laughing to break the tension; everybody but Rod that is.

“Man yaw’ll bullshittin!” he said angrily, as he stormed off. The rest of us looked at each other and shook our heads in disbelief. That was our boy, but he definitely had issues.

I enjoyed hanging out with my posse but I could also be very content staying in my 10x10 bedroom located just above the entrance to *Alley Stadium* on the second floor. The view was breath taking: just across the narrow alley was the western brick wall of a large court-way apartment building. I could look straight across into the kitchen window of an eighty-year-old woman, as my luck would have it. Rod once told me that before I moved in a couple of fine girls lived there and they used to run through the house “butt-naked.” I often lamented how much more I would have enjoyed staring out my window had they not been replaced by “Grandma Moses.”

By looking to the left, I could manage a view as far as home plate or the tall, green wooden gate leading into the court way of the apartment building where Lonnie and Pete and several of my other friends lived. To the right I could strain to see people and traffic travelling along West end Street. I would often hear in the distance an alluring pair of heels rhythmically clicking against the concrete pavement heading towards my window. On such

occasions, I sprung to my knees on my bed, pressed my nose against the window screen and strained to get a good look. If my suspicions were correct and it happened to be an attractive female wearing high heels, I rewarded my intuition with a long lustful stare as she made her way down the alley, usually headed for the court way entrance. On some lonely summer nights I would even conjure up the nerve to utter "hey baby," and then duck out of view when she would stare upwards in search of the cowardly beckoner. On more than one occasion a voice would shout back, "I know that's you up there, Peanuts – you pervert!"

But I mostly would sit in my room and create a world of my own; a world with imaginary characters who I not only named but also developed personalities for. They were usually a part of a sports team, being the sports nut that I was. I created my own baseball, football, and basketball leagues, complete with a schedule of games, and tons of statistics, all done through the magic of a shuffled and reshuffled deck of Bicycle playing cards. For example, the Chicago Dead Voters might be playing the Birmingham Lynch Mob. I made out the scorecards for both teams, shuffled the cards and begin the inning. Red Aces were home runs, black threes were triples, deuces were doubles, and so on. After three outs were recorded, I shuffled the deck and the other team came up to bat. Primitive? Yes, I know, but it got me through many a lonely night and helped develop the incredibly scary imagination I now posses.

One hot July night my posse seemed to be scattered to the four winds. Vic was in Cleveland visiting relatives, Lonnie and Pete were with their dad for the weekend, Rick was on lock-down for coming in drunk on a school night and Rod...whoever knew where Rod was. I found myself secluded in my alley loft engaged in an intense World Series game between the Brooklyn Mafia and the San Francisco Lite Foots. I had just begun shuffling the deck for the top of the ninth of a dead-even game when I heard the faint sound of heels clicking in the distance. Ignoring the crowds protest, I called time-out and leapt into position, nose firmly planted against the screen as I strained to see the silhouette in the pitch-dark night. The clicks weren't the normal progressive cadence, but more a "click-click" then a pause, followed by another short series of clicks and a pause.

Soon, the shapely frame of a female came into view and I was now able to determine the reason for the discordant clicking: the woman appeared to be smashed, whoever she was. She staggered from one point along the wall to the next, pausing to keep her equilibrium as she kept close contact with the brick edifice. My first inclination was to grab a shirt and run down to assist her, but as she got closer to my window I could tell this was a grown woman. I couldn't identify her as the darkness served well to mask her identity, but I could tell she was wearing a short tight-fitting dress. As she passed beneath

my window I continued straining to discover her identity. I thought about saying something but thought twice about that too.

Just as she approached the entrance to the court-yard, she was met by a tall shadowy figure that mysteriously appeared out of the gloomy night. He approached the distressed, yet unalarmed damsel, grabbed her by one arm and helped her through the gate beyond my view. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and lay on my bed, puzzling over the identities of the shadowy figures I had just observed, and what became of them – especially the very shapely, very drunk, female.

A night at Twelfth Street Beach had failed to yield the kind of excitement the quartet of horny young men was hoping for. They plowed through the moist sand, breathing the thick, fishy air on their way back to the car. In the distance an approaching figure could be seen walking briskly towards them and waiving as if in some kind of trouble. As they drew closer to each other it became clear that the figure was a female, which needless to say perked the young boys' interest. The closer they got the nakeder she appeared to be, to the point where the boys began to look at each other with shock and disbelief, as they quickened their pace.

Ground zero revealed a distressed fifty-plus nude woman, crying and pleading for help. As she stood sideways doing her best to cover her most

private parts, she explained that her boyfriend had beat her up and thrown her from his car a short time ago.

“What happened to your clothes?” one asked, handing her his shirt.

“He made me strip naked, and kept all my stuff in his car before he kicked me out,” she whimpered.

The eyes of the four boys were fixated on the distressed woman, who had slipped into the shirt which hung below her knees. “Could you guys please give me a ride home? I don’t live too far from here,” She pleaded.

Before the other boys could respond to her question, the tallest one stepped forward and grabbed her by the arm, and began leading the stunned woman towards the car. “You guys wait here for a few minutes, I got a little business to tend to,” he chuckled in a low dark voice. “Come on baby, I’ll take you home,” he said, now pulling the woman by her arm, as she stared back at the rest with a terrified look in her eyes.

The rest of the boys stood shaking their heads. “Hey!” one of them shouted. “Come on man, what you think you’re doing? Can’t you see that broad needs help?”

“Dude!” Another yelled, as their crony drifted further away, pulling the tearful woman by her arm. “Come on, man...what you doing?”

I woke up to the ringing of a black rotary telephone sitting on the floor by my bed. “Hello,” I answered, still dazed from my nightmarish siesta. “Who is this?”

“It’s Rick, man. What you up to?”

“Aw, nothing man I must of just dozed off. You still on lock-down, dude?” I asked.

“Yeah man, the old girl got me locked up for the next twenty four hours, but it’s cool. So how come you ain’t out hangin’ with the fellas tonight.”

I sat up on the bed rubbing my eyes. “What fellas? You and me the only ones around tonight – Vic’s in Cleveland, Lonnie and Pete with their old man for the weekend, and I ain’t seen yo’ boy Rod – you know how that is.”

“Uh, uh, Lonnie and Pete must be back, cause I just looked out the window and saw Rod leaving out they apartment,” he responded.

“Oh, I guess they must of got back early then,” I said.

“Well look here man, I better let you go, I hear the warden coming in and I ain’t supposed to be on the phone,” he joked. “I’ll holler at you later dude.”

“Later,” I said as we hung up. I struggled to my feet and went to the bathroom to take a leak. As I stood there relieving myself, something occurred to me. Lonnie and Pete had just left with their dad that morning headed for northern Wisconsin to go fishing. It seemed odd that they would have returned home that soon. I walked back into my dimly lit, musty room and dialed the Wilson’s number. It rang several times before a groggy female voice answered.

“Hello, who is this?”

“Uh, it’s Peanuts, Ms. Wilson. Is Lonnie or Pete there?”

She yawned for what seemed like minutes before responding. “No, Peanuts, they with their daddy fishing this weekend. They didn’t tell you?”

“You know, come to think of it, maybe they did. Okay, sorry to bother you.”

“Um, hm, bye, bye,” she moaned as she hung up, leaving me a bit bewildered. I fell back on my bed scratching my head and trying to put things together.

Now Rick just told me he saw Rod leaving the Wilson’s house...but the boys weren’t home...Ms. Wilson sounded like she was kind of out of it and...but wait a minute, who was that chick I saw stumbling down the alley?...she was kinda built like...and that tall thin dude who met her at the gate and was helping her kinda looked like...

All of a sudden I felt sick to my stomach.

Jim Croce once sang: “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape, you don’t spit into the wind, you don’t pull the mask of the Lone Ranger...” and you don’t screw yo’ friends’ momma – no matter how fine she is! How could that nigger?

Okay, okay, I was jumping to conclusions. I had to pull myself together and think clearly. Sure Rod was a horny bastard, sure he could be reckless and cold-blooded at times, but was he capable of this? I dropped to my knees and put my head on my bed as though I was petitioning God for answers. I wasn’t, I was just thinking about how I was going to find out what happened in that apartment between Ms. Wilson and Rod tonight. I fought the yen to conjure

images of my friend lying with my other friend's voluptuous mother. The thoughts were both titillating and revolting at the same time. The dark side of me was actually envious – I tried to fight those demons with every ounce of strength my “good-side” possessed. My “better angels” kept saying to me “there have to be boundaries – there has to be a line we don't cross.” But what would *I* have done? Was I really sure I could have resisted the temptation of such an attractive woman in her inebriated state? Of course I could! What the hell was I thinking? There was no way I could be such a dog – I was almost certain.

Two days later the issue still burned hot on my mind. This had obviously become more troubling to me than I would have thought. I seriously considered dumping Rod as a friend. On the other hand, I thought someday he and I might look back at the whole incident as just another one of our many childhood indiscretions and perhaps have a laugh or two about it – perish the thought! But there I was again, jumping to conclusions, even though in my own mind he was surely guilty of having done something untoward. After all, he made his inclinations known the other night when he got upset and stormed off when the rest of us refused to validate his out-of-control desires for a friend's mother. And hadn't Rick seen him leaving the apartment of the scantily dressed, intoxicated, alluring mother who would have been easy prey? And hadn't I established her presence and the boy's absence with my phone call shortly after Rod was reportedly seen leaving their apartment? And what

about the dream I had that night? Yeah, I had forgotten about that. That was surely Rod in my dream dragging off that poor abused naked woman, so he could get his rocks off despite her distress. The evidence - circumstantial as it might have been, seemed to be mounting. One thing was certain - I wouldn't rest until I confronted Rod and got an answer one way or the other.

Later that day I got my opportunity. As I was walking home from the bus stop after school, I saw Rod and Vic standing on the concrete porch laughing and talking - not unlike I'd seen them so many times before. Normally, my excitement at seeing my two pals would have compelled me to stop and "shoot the bull" with them even before dropping off my books and changing clothes. That day I wasn't so enthusiastic. I had a sobering confrontation ahead of me and I wasn't all that anxious to get to it. I merely waved as I walked past en route to our second floor duplex apartment.

"Hey nut, where you going? Can't you see your idols are standing up here?" Vic quipped.

"Yeah, yeah, I responded - I got more important things to do, like go take a dump. I'll see you deadbeats on the flip-side," I shot back.

“Well hurry up Professor Goodie,” Rod yelled out, referencing a name he and Vic had stuck me with based on my glasses and my reputation for studying, occasionally.

“In a minute,” I yelled back. “Your daily dose of wisdom is coming shortly.”

“Just don’t flush it all down the toilet,” Vic replied as they both cracked up.

“Very funny, you overage, underachievers,” I offered as my parting shot before running up the stairs to the second floor apartment.

Twenty minutes later, I descended the wooden stairs, burdened with concerns about the task that lie ahead of me. I walked slowly across the lawn towards the concrete porch with my eyes focused towards the ground. Vic and Rod were still standing on the porch laughing and talking. I approached and sat down on one of the concrete slabs.

“So what’s eatin’ you? You look like somebody beat you up and took your lunch money,” Vic chided, much to Rod’s delight.

“Naw man. Just got things on my mind,” I said looking only at Vic. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Rod just yet. “So where were you cats over the weekend?” I managed to inquire.

“Jeeeeeze, Nuts,” Vic responded. “Is your senility creeping up on you again? Remember I told you we and my mother were going to Cleveland for the weekend?”

“That’s right, that’s right, I must’ve forgot. “And you Rod?” I questioned, still not looking his way.

“Well you know,” he began in typical Rod-like bullshit fashion. “Here and their, checkin’ up on all my many women.”

“Translation: he was at home playing with his self,” Vic chimed in without missing a beat. Rod responded by extending his middle finger towards Vic.

“Rotate!” was his single word reply.

“Yeah, that’s one of yo’ women right there – show him the other nine. I’ll be right back,” Vic stated as he opened the door to the house. “I gotta go take a Rod...I mean a crap.”

“You big overweight mother...” Rod started, as he pretended to throw something at the fleeing big man.

Now was my chance – the two of us were alone and I had to get this off my chest. There were a few moments of silence and then we both started speaking at the same time.

“Go head man,” I offered.

“No, you go head I didn’t have nothing exciting to say,” he insisted.

I began. “Rod, you and me been tight a long time, dude. We been through a lot of stuff together, we’ve had some real good times. We like the same kind of music, food, booze, we even sometimes like the same kind of women – except that chick you took to your prom, that chick was ugly man, I don’t care what nobody say,” I joked to try to take a little of the edge off of the seriousness of the topic.

“Hey, you my boy and I hope we stay cool – but where’s all this going?” Rod asked.

“I’m getting there.” Look here man, I’ve been giving this a lot of thought and I’m totally convinced that I’m right and you’re dead wrong, and I just got to tell you...”

Before I could unload the bombshell, Lonnie Wilson walked up.

“What up fellas?” He greeted.

Of all the coincidences, I thought to myself. Just as I was about to blast Rod for doing the unthinkable with Ms. Wilson – who should pop up but her baby boy! Obviously, I had to put the brakes on our conversation, but what if Rod pressed me to get to the point? After all, he probably didn’t know where I was heading. I would have to make up something quick.

“So, where the heck were you and Pete over the weekend?” I hastened to change the subject.

“We went fishin’ with my old man up in northern Wisconsin...all that way to catch a few tiny fish you couldn’t hardly get a mouth full of. But I guess it was worth spending a little time with our old man. We don’t get to see the cat but a couple of times a year. By the way, I got something to say to you,” Lonnie said abruptly, approaching Rod at the top of the stairs.

“Oh shit!” I thought. What does he know? Could he have found out about Rod and Ms. Wilson? My stomach was turning flips and my heart started beating at an exponential rate. I slowly eased up the stairs to try to position myself between Lonnie and Rod at the slightest hint of violence. Rod was tall and slim and had taken karate lessons for a long time. But Lonnie was pretty muscular from lifting weights and playing football. I could be in for quite a battle trying to be a peace maker. What the hell was taking Vic so long, I wondered? Before I could ease my way between them, Lonnie had bounded up the stairs and was standing toe-to-toe with Rod.

“Hey bro’ I just want to let you know how much I appreciate what you did,” he began, much to my amazement. I stood there awestruck with my mouth hanging open in great anticipation of what was to come next.

“My Ol’ girl told me how you helped her to the door after she had one of her dizzy spells the other night. Man, I’m just glad it was one of you cats, I can only imagine what could of happened if the wrong dude had seen a good looking woman like my mother staggering down the alley like she was drunk or something. I just want you to know how much I appreciate you bro,’” Lonnie said as he grabbed a surprised looking Rod and hugged him.

“Hey man, don’t even mention it,” Rod replied wearing a familiar sly grin. “That’s what Homies are for,” he added.

"Look here, I gotta run fellas' I'll catch up with you later," Lonnie declared before hustling off towards his house. Just then, Vic walked back onto the porch.

"Whew! What a relief, he proclaimed proudly, stretching his arms out wide." Hey I thought I heard somebody else out here talking," he said.

"Yeah, it was Lonnie just stopping by to thank Rod for helping his old girl up the stairs the other night. It seems she had a little dizzy spell and Rod was there Johnnie-on-the-spot, to help her up the stairs to the door of her apartment," I announced.

"Is that right?" Vic asked staring over at Rod who was looking off into the distance while rubbing his face with his right hand.

"Yep, I done my good deed for the month," he answered dispassionately.

Vic and I turned and looked at each other with raised eyebrows, then slowly looked in different directions. Several moments of awkward silence passed.

"So, how 'bout them Cubs?" I asked.

"They suck!" Rod replied.

"And where does that leave yo' funky White Sox? Vic chimed in.

And that was the last we ever spoke of the matter.

Kaboom!

Kaboom! The serenity of the early morning was violently interrupted. I sat straight up in bed after hearing the unmistakably piercing sound of a shotgun blast which appeared to be coming from just across the street. I looked at the clock on the table next to my bed which reported 2 am. Early morning gunshots were no anomaly in our blighted, gang-infested neighborhood, but the sobering sound of a solitary shotgun blast was still enough to capture most people's attention. I scrambled from my bed to the hard wood floor and peeked under the window shade facing the direction of the blast. I saw nothing and no one, instantly. But a few seconds later, I saw a streaking figure emerge from the gangway in the pre-dawn gloom, jump in a waiting automobile, and speed away. I continued to lie quietly on the floor in my Boxer shorts and T' shirt, shaking from fear and waiting to see what would happen next. Less than an hour later, the neighborhood was vibrating with a cacophony of sirens, and glistening with a dizzying array of flashing and twirling red and blue lights. Months later I was able to piece together the events of that evening and their aftermath.

Poverty was a word we never gave much thought to in describing our conditions growing up in the Rockwood Square district. Nevertheless, we frequently went to bed hungry after peeking inside a noisy, barely cool refrigerator and finding nothing but a whiff of stale air and a plastic milk

bottle filled with water. We routinely fortified holey gym shoes with slabs of cardboard and wore them until we could afford new ones. And our already porous homes became extra cold some winter nights because there was too much moth at the end of our money and our parents couldn't afford to pay the coal man to fill the voracious bins. Truly, we could have called ourselves poor, but heck, that was just life in our neighborhood, and precious few of us were unfamiliar with similar conditions. We all learned to deal with it and along the way, my friends and I came up with some pretty creative ways to make life a little more enjoyable, in spite of our circumstances. As I look back on those years I thank God for the blessing of blissful ignorance which kept us from drowning in self pity, or looking for excuses to fail, as others did.

One of the primary reasons for our plight – acknowledged or not – was the simple fact that there was a dearth of daddies. I once noted that only two of my ten closest friends had their old man living at home – and those two weren't exactly the Ward Cleaver types. Thank God, that despite our troubled generation of absentee black fathers, there was a nobler, very visible and active generation of grandparents in the neighborhood – men and women who lived through some of the worst racism this country had to offer including Jim Crow Laws instituted before the turn of the century. They grew up picking cotton in the south as sharecroppers, being treated slightly better than slaves, before many of the men left to serve in the military. Others traveled north to

perform menial jobs that paid just a tad more money, but offered a great deal more hope for them and their progeny.

William Barker Sr. was known to most on our street simply as "Gramps," he was a bear of a man who, well into his seventies, stood six-foot, four inches and maintained a respectably solid physique. Gramps was a no-nonsense man of few words who cherished his many years of service in the U.S. Army, most of them as a revered Drill Sergeant. One of my favorite legends described Gramps being sassed by a lanky, impudent teenager from the neighborhood, who had the temerity to question the validity of the old man's highly acclaimed military record. Gramps reportedly sat in a rocking chair on his front porch, calmly absorbing the young fools' taunts. Apparently emboldened by the old soldier's tacit response, the young man recklessly encroached within the kill-zone. Suddenly, with the pounce of a crouching tiger, the old man sprung from his chair, wound up with the back of his mighty right paw, and like a tennis player peppering a solid backhand at his opponent, slammed the young jester flush across the gibbs, launching him from the porch, over the chain link fence, onto the hood of an impervious '57 Desoto, Firesweep, narrowly avoiding impalement by Hernando's barbed helmet.

And so it was with the grandfathers and grandmothers who formed the nucleus of so many extended families prevalent in our neighborhood. Without their stabilizing influence and old fashion values, demonstrated through:

personal responsibility, common sense, and a rock-solid work ethic, our neighborhood would have really been in shambles. Not only did they help protect us from predators from within and without, they also provided shelter and nurture to a generation of grandchildren whose parents often proved ill-equipped to provide for their own children without assistance.

Ada Smith, known to most as "Mother Smith," was another pillar in our community. Widowed for many years, she lived alone in a small cottage in the rear of the neighborhood convenience store. Mrs. Smith and her husband Robert were the first blacks to move into the formerly all Jewish neighborhood. She served as both a nanny and housekeeper for the Steinberg's and their two sons who once owned the small store and lived in a large apartment above it. The Steinberg's grew so fond of, and dependent on Mrs. Smith, that they allowed her and Mr. Smith to live in the cottage rent-free after Mrs. Steinberg's mother, who once lived there, died in the mid 1950's. The Steinberg's were one of the last Jewish families to move from the neighborhood in the early 60's and arranged to sell the small cottage on contract to the Smiths upon their departure.

Over the years Mother Smith welcomed the growing number of black families moving to South Washtenaw Street with fresh baked apple pies that she and Mr. Smith delivered personally. She became adviser, counselor and even a mid-wife to many of the young black mothers in the area. To replace

the income lost when the Steinberg's moved away, Mother Smith began babysitting for some of the working mothers in the neighborhood and although she and Mr. Smith had no children of their own, she earned the title "Mother" from so many grateful families whose children she had helped deliver and or care for. By the late 1960's, an aging Mother Smith was caring for a second generation of neighborhood children. She lost her beloved husband of fifty years in 1968 to cancer and now in her middle-seventies, struggled to make ends meet.

The neighborhood had changed dramatically over the almost three decades since the Smiths' moved in. The once vibrant tree-lined street with its meticulously manicured lawns, had succumbed to the ravages of poverty and a generation of residents with less of a sense of investment in the community, who lacked the means to maintain their homes and yards. This combined with the city's own disinterest in the upkeep of streets and public sidewalks in what had become a one hundred percent black neighborhood, caused most of the area to become an eyesore. The more successful black families began moving out to neighborhoods further west leaving behind a preponderance of unemployed and single parent households. Another of the unfortunate byproducts of the neighborhood's decline was the emergence of ruthless street gangs, many composed of young men who grew up in the area without hope or a strong sense of purpose. A declining job market and the city's deteriorating public school system added to the problems. But perhaps most

detrimental to the neighborhood was the lack of strong men to take a stand against the violent youth uprisings. Many had succumbed to drug and alcohol addiction and an equal number were incarcerated. The old guard - that venerable generation of plantation migrants and military veterans was aging and dying off, leaving a discernable void of male leadership in the community. Undisciplined teenage boys took advantage of this void and the teen pregnancy rate shot up along with murders, rapes and other violent crimes.

An ailing Gramps, a shade away from his eightieth birthday, spent most summer days rocking on his front porch and scowling at the current generation of young scoundrels who strutted up and down Washtenaw, cursing and fighting all day and wreaking untold havoc into the wee hours of the morning. Though his body had been ravaged by a variety of illnesses, his mind remained sound.

“Hey you, boy,” his weakened voice would call out from time to time.
“Cut all that cussin’ out!”

“Shut up old man,” was the gentlest reply he would receive. Sometimes the response was reduced to a crude gesture.

"I'll whoop yo' ass boy," the riled up old veteran would reply, chewing tobacco flying everywhere. "I knew yo' momma befo' you was even thought of you little nappy head punk."

One day Gramps watched as an angry light-skinned boy named Chucky, argued several minutes with a young girl carrying a baby in her arms. Gramps watched intently as the argument grew more heated and the boy began to gesture wildly at the cowering girl. Finally, enraged, he hauled off and slapped her across the face so hard she fell to the ground dropping the screaming child. Gramps struggled to his feet.

"I swear, one of these days I'm gon' kill you and that thievin' bitch!" The girl threatened between sobs, as she scrambled to gather her wailing child.

"Hey! Hey you boy! Is you crazy? What you doin' slapping that girl like that? What kind a man is you? He railed on at the now calm young man, who was reaching beneath his shirt into his waistband. He turned to face Gramps and pointed a black .38 revolver at his head. Gramps stood next to his still rocking chair and stared straight into the eyes of the young assailant without flinching. The boy continued staring and pointing the weapon at Gramps for what seemed like minutes, as the horrified girl remained seated on the ground clutching her baby, shaking and sobbing. After several seconds, the boy slowly lowered the weapon and stuck it back in his waist band.

“Ha, ha, ha - scared yo’ass didn’t I - old nigger?” He taunted.

Gramps continued staring at the boy as he recalled all the times he had been shot at and the one time he had been nicked in his left shoulder by a sniper’s bullet in Germany during World War I. He was angry, but not afraid. “Okay boy,” he mumbled. “You think you bad...we’ll see...we’ll see.”

Over the next several months Chucky White would become notorious as the leader of the Supreme Gangster street gang. The gang grew exponentially, recruiting hordes of angry, disaffected black youth. They terrorized the neighborhood with burglaries and robberies, culminating in a rash of homicides, with most of the victims being rival gang members, but occasionally an innocent civilian was the casualty. Such was the case one night in the middle of one of Chicago’s hottest summers.

During the day neighborhood kids turned on fire hydrants several times trying to cool themselves in the sweltering heat. Ice cream trucks made constant rounds through the neighborhood and homemade snowball stands sprung up like dandelions, offering multicolored crushed ice scooped neatly into paper cylinders. Elderly residents sat on their front porches fanning themselves with folded over newspapers, while large mayonnaise jars filled with ice water sat at their sides. In spite of the intense heat, little black girls,

braids flopping wildly, and sweat streaming down their cherubic faces,
jumped double-dutch rope as they chanted:

I like ice cream

I like cake

I like a colored boy

And he don't fake

So step back white boy

You don't shine

I'll get a colored boy

to beat yo' behind

Last night,

the night before

I met my boyfriend at the candy store

He bought me ice cream

He bought me cake

He sent me home with a belly ache

Momma, momma, I feel sick

Call the doctor, quick, quick, quick

Doctor, Doctor, before I die

Close my eyes one to five

I said a one, a two, a three, a four, a five...

As the evening wound down, youthful exuberance gave way to teenage menace which overtook the streets like a slow moving herd of locust. And as the night began to sparkle with lit squares and joints; joyful chants were

replaced by wanton profanity, playful shrieks by angry threats, and ice cream truck ditties by loud thumping car stereos. By ten o' clock the transition was complete as muscle cars raced perilously up and down the pot-holed streets, and roving packs of hard-looking teenage boys and girls traced the sidewalks scoping out opportunities for mischief. Two meandering shadowy figures, one male, one female, stopped long enough to stare down the gangway between Nick's Neighborhood Store and the two-story brick building to the south. They whispered to each other then continued down the street past Gramps house, oblivious to his watchful eye as he sat in his rocking chair camouflaged by darkness.

Early the next morning, two Chicago Police Department squad cars followed by an ambulance, screeched to a curbside stop between Gramps house and Nick's Store, partially blocking the southbound traffic lane. Four officers hustled from the two vehicles and hurried through the gangway followed by two EMT's hauling a stretcher. They arrived at the rear cottage where they were met by a young shrieking mother holding a small child and pointing anxiously towards an open door up a flight of stairs. The police waved the lady and the EMT's back as they drew their weapons, two proceeding cautiously up the stairs and two running around to cover the back of the cottage. As they approached the door the lead officer nodded to his partner as they made a button-hole entrance into the neatly furnished living room. They cautiously entered the small kitchen where they discovered the

partially clothed body of an elderly woman spread out on the white linoleum in a pool of blood, a gaping hole through her chest. Through the wall just behind her was an equal sized hole which opened up to the alley behind the house. The officers briefly made eye contact, shook their heads and continued to search the apartment.

A short blurb in the next day's newspaper, described Ada Marie Smith as a long time resident of south Washtenaw Street, who made her living providing childcare for neighborhood families. Her age was listed as eighty two; cause of death: "Fatal gunshot wound." Her body had been discovered by a horrified neighbor who heard the shot and went over to check on Mrs. Smith. She had no known living relatives.

The A.L. Beale Funeral Home had never seen anything quite like it. Throngs of people streamed in to view the body from the time the wake began at six p.m. until they were forced to turn people away at ten o'clock. The Funeral held at a large Westside Baptist church, was even more spectacular. Mother Smith laid peacefully, hands folded over her stomach, adorned in a white sequenced dress. The undertakers were able to recreate the same pleasant smile she was so well known for. They accented her small, furrowed face with eyeliner and a hint of rouge which she hadn't worn for many years, and completed their craft with a pair of gold earrings her husband had given her for their twenty-fifth anniversary. Flowers and flowering plants adorned three sides of the small coffin with a myriad of cards and condolences

attached. A phalanx of mourners filed past the casket, ranging in age from toddlers to contemporaries of the deceased, each pausing to offer a final smile, touch, or whisper. Many shed tears. The pastor gave a lengthy eulogy, recalling all of the wonderful work Sister Smith had done in the community and at the church in her more than twenty years as a member. He asked for prayer for the “lost souls” who prey on the elderly and the weak among us.

Gramps sat silently in the back of the church alone, an occasional tear slipping from his cloudy eyes. He chose not to view the remains of the last neighborhood resident to have tenure exceeding his. When the service ended he moved quickly through the doors of the church and out to the street just before officials and family members made their exit. He walked the several blocks back to his empty house, climbed the stairs, unlocked the doors and found his way to his easy chair in the middle of the small living room. He sank into the chair and began to sob loudly. He remained slumped in his chair several minutes until startled by the telephone. He stumbled over to the glass table where the phone vibrated loudly with each ring.

“Hello,” he answered in a barely audible voice.

“Gramps...uh, Mr. Gramps – hi, my name is Tiara. You, uh, don’t really know me but I really need to talk to you about something,” she struggled.

“Who is this?” Gramps responded gruffly, “I don’t know no *Terra*. What you calling me about?”

“Yes sir, I know you don’t know me but this is very important...it’s kind of a matter of life and death. Can I please stop by and talk to you, I don’t trust talking on the phone,” she pleaded.

Gramps paused several seconds as he strained to determine if the young female voice on the other end was part of a scam or if she was sincerely in need of his help. “You come by yourself – you hear me?”

“Yes sir.”

“I’ll be watching close and if I see anything funny I’ll have my shotgun in my hands. You got that?” He warned.

“Yes sir, I’ll be alone. I’ll be there in ten minutes, is that okay?”

“Come on,” he replied curtly before hanging up the phone.

No sooner than he hung up the phone, Gramps rushed into his bedroom closet, unlocked an old gun cabinet and retrieved a vintage Remington 12 gauge shotgun he had kept in immaculate condition since his discharge from

the U.S army, following WWII. He held it admiringly, running his hand across the light oak stock and recalling the first time he used it during World War I to clear trenches with its powerful bursts of buckshot. He also recalled using it when he reenlisted to fight in the Pacific arena during World War II. However, the weapon's most recent use was less distinguished than its service in the two world wars. When Gramps still owned a farm in Mississippi with his beloved wife Bessie, he often packed its chamber with rock salt to ward off pesky critters and would-be watermelon thieves who ended up with buttocks full of salty reminders of their wayward attempts. The old gun was truly part of the family and as Gramps reflected, he also thought lovingly about his late wife who died of pneumonia in 1947, shortly after Gramps retired from the military. They were married twenty years with no children and had been looking forward to spending the rest of their lives farming and visiting relatives in different parts of the country. So distraught was Gramps at her sudden death, he sold his land and moved to Chicago to live close to his only sibling.

Gramps stirred from his reminiscing to focus on the phone call, wondering what in the world was going on. The last few days were a whirlwind and he barely had time to mourn. He walked back to his chair and sat down laying the shot gun across his lap as he waited for the mysterious caller to arrive. Ten minutes passed then twenty, then thirty – no one arrived. Gramps drifted off to sleep. More than an hour later the door bell rang

startling Gramps from his sleep. He grabbed his shot gun and walked over to the door peering through the peep hole with one eye and locating a smallish teenage girl clutching a purse and looking around nervously.

“Who is it?” He barked.

“It’s me, Tiara.”

Gramps walked over to the window and peeked through the blinds. After a few seconds he walked over to the door and slowly unlocked both deadbolts and removed the chain before opening the door, still clutching the shotgun in his right hand. Tiara moved quickly inside the house as Gramps hurried to close the door behind her. She noticed the gun in Gramps’ hands and started to tremble.

“Wha-what’s that for?” She asked.

“Don’t worry about it...I’ll put it away,” he said as he stepped out of the room briefly and returned empty-handed. “Okay, so what is it you need to see me about?” He asked.

“Sir, do you remember that time you was sitting on the porch and me and my boyfriend Chucky was out there arguing and then he slapped me in my face and knocked me down, and then...”

“Slow down missy – yeah, I ‘member that. That yellow punk pointed a gun at me...I ain’t never gon’ forget that, long as I live!” Gramps vowed.

“Yes sir, well he’s my baby’s daddy and he been beating me up like that ever since he started messin’ with that ol’ tall high-yellow bitch – ‘scuse my language,” she said as she looked down at the floor shaking her head, tears developing in her eyes. “I love him but I swear I can’t take no more of his shit.”

“Where yo’ baby at, girl? Gramps asked.

“Oh he alright; he with my momma ‘nam on the Southside. I took him out there this morning because of what happened last night.”

“Well what happened child, got you so upset?” Gramps demanded.

“Mr. Gramps, you promise you won’t say nothing to nobody, cause he crazy for real. He get to smokin’ his weed and he liable to do anything – he

proved that the other night," she said in a more hushed tone as she wrapped her arms around herself and began to rock back and forth.

Gramps got up from his chair and walked over to Tiara, looking directly at her. "Girl you ain't makin' no sense. What is it you tryin' to say?"

She began to sob uncontrollably. "He gon' kill me, I swear he is!" She blurted out. My baby ain't gon' have no mamma to raise him, 'cause that crazy nigger gon' kill my ass over some skinny ol' skanky ho!" she continued sobbing.

"Okay, little lady just try to calm down, just calm down now," Gramps consoled, as he handed her some tissue. "Now you got to tell me what this boy done and why he want to kill you."

"He got a shotgun and – I seen where he hid it too."

"I gots a shotgun too, that ain't nothing new; most of these punks runnin' around here got guns," Gramps added.

"No sir, see you don't understand...he done something terrible and he said if I ever breathed a word to anybody... I was gon' be dead." She began sobbing again.

“Okay sweetie, okay,” Gramps said trying to sound more compassionate as he handed her some more tissue. “But you got to tell me what he done.”

She paused, then blurted out, “He killed her.”

“Who?” Gramps demanded.

Tiara paused and continued rocking – slower this time. “She was the sweetest old lady I ever knew – he didn’t have to do that to her. She would of gave him anything he wanted..”

“Oh, sweet Jesus!” Gramps cried out, clutching his heart with his right hand. “That bastard’s the one done killed Mother Smith,” he said reaching for his chair and not even waiting for confirmation from Tiara. “Did you see him do it?”

“No, but I was waiting in the car when I heard this loud ‘kaboom!’ They was just ‘spose to rob her, not kill her - that woman practically raised me, Lord know I didn’t want to see her hurt!” She began crying hysterically.

“Okay, you gots to pull yo’self together now,” Gramps said, walking over and putting his arms around her shoulder. “We got to figure some things out.”

The sun had set over an hour ago and the room was black save for a sliver of light from the street lamp sneaking through a slight breach in the curtains, and the pale light from the aquarium that sat in the adjacent room. Tiara was much calmer now as she sat on the plastic covered sofa in Gramps living room. The rich cherry tobacco smell from Gramp's pipe wafted through the room as he rocked slowly in his easy chair. "Just do what I say, and he won't never hurt you no more, you hear me? Gramps asked.

"Ye-yes sir, but what if something go wrong? What if the police figure it out, Mr. Gramps? I don't want you to have to go to jail for me," Tiara cried.

"Baby girl, I done lived my life – you got yo' whole life ahead of you; besides, you got that little boy to raise. Just trust me, I been in two world wars; I know what I'm doing." Gramps got up from his chair and laid his pipe in an ash tray on the cocktail table. "It's gettin' close to time; why don't you go on out the back way like we talked about – we'll be talkin' again."

Tiara gathered herself and headed toward the back door. She stopped and walked back over to Gramps and hugged him around his neck. "You be careful Mr. Gramps," she pleaded, tears streaming down her face.

“I’ll be just fine; you run on now.” She opened the door and walked hastily towards the alley and disappeared into the night. Gramps returned to his easy chair with his shotgun once again lying across his lap as he faced the front door.

The Grandfather clock in the dining room struck 2 am, and Gramps was still wide awake. Suddenly, the knob on the front door jiggled slightly, startling Gramps at first. Then it began slowly turning counterclockwise. Seconds later the heavy wooden door began wedging inward, inch by inch, emitting an ever so slight creaking sound. Soon, a wooly head poked through the opening and two widened eyes began to search the room nervously. Then, a scrawny neck appeared followed by a lanky torso, and long dangling arms and legs. In less than two minutes the smiling intruder had made full entry and stood anxiously anticipating a fruitful heist. The intruder reached back to push the door shut, then turned and took one step into the dark room. Their eyes met.

“Kabooooom!”

Chucky sat up in bed dazed, as he gazed around at the gang graffitied walls of his one-room apartment. “Hey baby, did you hear that?” he asked.

Tiarra rolled over slowly, rubbing her eyes as she glanced at the clock on the dresser. "What? You hearin' things baby. Go on back to sleep; everything is gone be alright...yep, it's gon' be just fine," she declared, as she rolled back on her side, smiling from ear to ear.

Gramps walked over to examine the thin victim who lay hemorrhaging on the hard wood floor, a gaping hole clear through the chest. He looked a second time, straining for clarity in the faint light of dawn. Suddenly his eyes widened and his heart pounded out of control as he dropped his gun and fell backward clutching his chest.

When the first emergency unit arrived they discovered two deceased. One elderly man, cause of death, an apparent heart attack. The second victim was an unidentified light-complexioned black female, dead from a shotgun slug through the heart. As the coroner's deputies carried out the two white sheet-draped stretchers the old wooden rocking chair sat still and erect, as if to salute its fallen companion.

As Gramps' remains were being loaded into the back of a police paddy wagon, a friend remarked, "The last of the Mohicans...what do we do now?" I nodded slowly in agreement.