

“Tale of Two Cities”

André Patterson

Sociological Autobiography

I was stranded on an island surrounded by shark infested waters. I sat on a burnt orange, mushroom-shaped stool that didn't match any of the other drab, worn-out furniture. I was pouting, blowing cigarette smoke out of a dirty mesh-screened window, into an outside world that I couldn't get to. It was Evanston, Illinois, early fall, 1996, I was seventeen years old. My dilemma was the result of the division of this small northern suburb. For the black folks that grew up here, low income, poor black folks, there's only two sides of town; the “south end”, and the “west end”. The “south end” is bordered by Howard street, a once booming commercial corridor that divides the suburb of Evanston, from the city of Chicago. This “one” is the self-proclaimed land of several tribes of Vice Lords and the Black P. Stones. The “west end” is the invisible dividing line between the more affluent part of Evanston, which contains large, elaborate homes along the Lakefront, and their prestigious neighbor, Northwestern University. Within this buffer zone we call the “west end”, is a homogeneous concentration of G.D.s (Gangster Disciples), who call this their land.

There was a perpetual hostility between the gangs on these “ends”. I don't recall a time where one could walk freely on either side without threat of harm. There did exist a rare breed that was so feared and/or revered, that could roam with impunity. I was neither of these. I was a Vice Lord and I could get it on sight.

I stayed with my grandma, my aunt, my uncle in a small two-bedroom apartment, where I slept on a ragged chaise lounge chair, (every morning I'd have to clean up its yellow guts that would spill out during the night), and my aunt the dingy couch in the next room. 1944 Grey was a two-story, modern, red-brick building, on a narrow one-way residential block, that didn't see much traffic outside of its resident; a black, mostly elderly, working class group, whose grown children would come to visit on special occasions. I rarely saw any street cats passing through this peaceful, tree-lined strip of land. But each block surrounding it formed a perfect square of danger for me.

None of the G.D.s knew I lived there yet. But getting to school every day was an adventure in anxiety. It was only a two-block sprint to the safe, neutral back door of Evanston Township High School, but it might as well have been two miles. I had to time things just right because the first obstacle I had to cross was busy Emerson street, where I could easily encounter the early

morning hustlers on their way to a high traffic drug spot, or the ones who had been out all night, now headed back to the places where they laid their heads.

After school, all of the “brothers” would meet up (safety in numbers) and march towards the south end. I’d hang out until after dark and get one of the homies to drop me off. On the weekends I would ride with my couch neighbor, aunt Lonnie, and have her drop me off at one of the “middle” areas that was unclaimed land by either group. But this particular Saturday, I had gotten stranded. I couldn’t get in touch with any of my so-called brothers, and my aunt Lonnie hadn’t been off the couch all day.

“A.J. I need you to go to the store and get me some water and cigarettes.”

My frustration turned to fear as my grandma solicited me for this errand. I usually avoided these inevitable requests because I was never in the house during open business hours. My stomach began an Olympic level gymnastic routine. I had several options, but every road led to my demise. Every mini-mart and gas station in walking distance were flames that attracted loitering G.D.s like moths. I might not make it to the store, let alone through the door.

I looked over at my grandma who occupied the chaise lounge during my waking hours. I tried to mask the dread that someone had packed in a needle and injected into my veins. But it might have been the twitch at the right corner of my mouth, as I struggled to push out an affirmative response, or the subtle mist gathering around my cornea that gave me away.

“What’s wrong? You don’t feel like going? I can wait ‘til tomorrow...”

“Naw grandma, you ‘ain’t gotta wait, I’ll go.”

My grandma was the color of coffee with too much cream in it, and as sweet as three big spoons of sugar in it. Her curly white hair framed her pumpkin-shaped face, causing it to appear to glow, like a mythical cherubin. She was still as beautiful as she was in the black-and-white photo welcoming dust atop the busted floor-model T.V. by the door. I would never tell her no. She had cradled me in her bosom when I thought there was no familial comfort for me in this world.

When I was sixteen (a year prior), I ran away from the cramped, one-bedroom basement apartment where I shared that lone room with my father and little brother, while my stepmom set up shop in the adjacent living room. My dad moved us there when I was eleven, after the neighborhood grocery store, he had worked in since he was in high school laid him off. Sam’s Club, a wholesale store that sells super-size everything, opened up just a few blocks away, and old

Bernstein's that had been open since the 70's, couldn't compete. I went from having my own room to having no room to breathe.

When I showed up at my grandma's doorstep with my book bag and a brown garbage bag full of clothes, she opened the door, called my dad, and told him I'd be staying with her. Her only stipulation was, "You have to keep going to school."

She didn't know the detrimental lifestyle I had flung myself into shortly after coming to stay with her. I wanted to keep it like that. I couldn't bear to see the disappointment that would register in her heart if she found out so, I decided within myself, that I wasn't going to allow my decisions to dictate what I would and wouldn't do for her.

"Kool Mils and what'chu want, that exotic berry water?" I confirmed and headed towards the door like it was nothing, just a routine store run.

Before I left, I glanced at my aunt sprawled out on the couch, rubbing her coarse feet together like kindling wood to start a fire.

"Dammit!" I cursed myself for not converting my learner's permit into a driver's license. I could've borrowed her car and driven to a neutral territory, where I wouldn't be maimed for trying to fulfill my grandma's desire for squares and flavored beverages.

I finally opened the door and threw myself off the plank. I was moving now, but my legs felt like oatmeal and someone just tipped the pot over and let me ooze slowly down the steps. I was slightly comforted by the fact that it was night and I could cloak myself in the shadows. There weren't many streetlights in the area. Guys would find ways to blow them and it would be years before the city would get around to fixing them. Then it struck me like a bright idea. At the intersection of Church and Dodge, a semi-busy street adjacent to the side entrances of the high school, was a "corner store" owned by Arabs (A-rabs). G.D.s congregated there, and sold drugs there after school hours, because during the day the police would post up a squad car, in case any of the white students wanted to patronize the Arab-owned burger joint "Gee's" that was right next door. Further down from the hot spot of Church and Dodge there's Sam's Barbershop, a store front that had hosted a number of short-lived businesses over the years, and then there's another Arab-owned mini-mart; A convenient second option if Church and Dodge wasn't stocked with a certain brand of cigarettes or soda. It was usually unoccupied apart from the welcoming stench of body odor that stood at the door and hugged you when you entered. There was no action here, so no one loitered there.

It could also be accessed via a low traffic side street, Brown, which didn't have a working streetlight. So, I could slip out of the shadows, walk a few steps, and slide into the store indistinguishable to anyone looking down the corner. I set off on my mission impossible with a new optimism.

Fifteen minutes later I walked out of the store, plastic bag full of goods in hand, feeling slightly triumphant. I expelled air violently from my nose a couple times, trying to get rid of the odor that was clinging to my nose hairs. Just as I headed back toward the darkness from which I came, a burgundy-colored SUV with midnight tinted window pulled up on the corner of my safe route and stopped. Almost in unison, all the doors of the truck flew open. Six or seven G.D.s jumped out the car twisting their fingers into their fraternal symbol, directing it, challenging, towards me. Before I dropped my grandma's plastic bag of goods to turn around and run, all I could think was, "I should've called my mom to see if I could stay with her on the 'south end'".