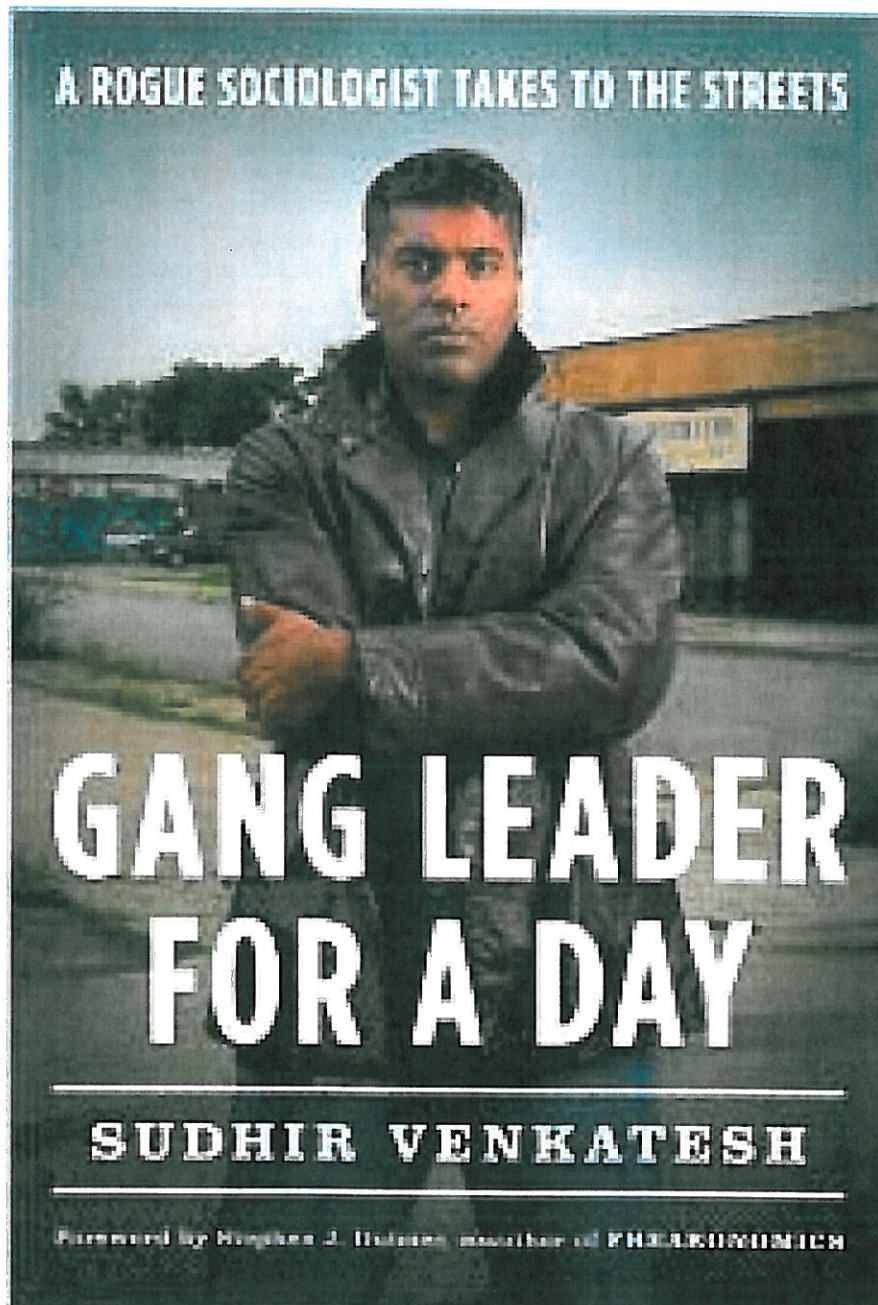


**Sudhir Venkatesh – Extracts from Chapter 1 –**  
**How does it feel to be black and poor?**



**There are copies of this book available in the ILC**

**Extract 1 – Sudhir Venkatesh describes his interest in the subject area, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative data.**

**Useful to apply to Positivism and Interpretivism.**

*How Does It Feel to  
Be Black and Poor?*

During my first weeks at the University of Chicago, in the fall of 1989, I had to attend a variety of orientation sessions. In each one, after the particulars of the session had been dispensed with, we were warned not to walk outside the areas that were actively patrolled by the university's police force. We were handed detailed maps that outlined where the small enclave of Hyde Park began and ended: this was the safe area. Even the lovely parks across the border were off-limits, we were told, unless you were traveling with a large group or attending a formal event.

It turned out that the ivory tower was also an ivory fortress. I lived on the southwestern edge of Hyde Park, where the university housed a lot of its graduate students. I had a studio apartment in a ten-story building just off Cottage Grove Avenue, a historic boundary between Hyde Park and Woodlawn, a poor black neighborhood. The contrast would be familiar to anyone who has spent time around

an urban university in the United States. On one side of the divide lay a beautifully manicured Gothic campus, with privileged students, most of them white, walking to class and playing sports. On the other side were down-and-out African Americans offering cheap labor and services (changing oil, washing windows, selling drugs) or panhandling on street corners.

I didn't have many friends, so in my spare time I started taking long walks, getting to know the city. For a budding sociologist, the streets of Chicago were a feast. I was intrigued by the different ethnic neighborhoods, the palpable sense of culture and tradition. I liked that there was one part of the city, Rogers Park, where Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis congregated. Unlike the lily-white suburbs of Southern California where I'd grown up, the son of immigrants from South Asia, here Indians seemed to have a place in the ethnic landscape along with everyone else.

I was particularly interested in the poor black neighborhoods surrounding the university. These were neighborhoods where nearly half the population didn't work, where crime and gang activity were said to be entrenched, where the welfare rolls were swollen. In the late 1980s, these isolated parts of the inner cities gripped the nation's attention. I went for many walks there and started playing basketball in the parks, but I didn't see any crime, and I didn't feel particularly threatened. I wondered why the university kept warning students to keep out.

As it happened, I attracted a good bit of curiosity from the locals. Perhaps it was because these parks didn't attract many nonblack visitors, or perhaps it was because in those days I dressed like a Dead-head. I got asked a lot of questions about India—most of which I couldn't answer, since I'd moved to the States as a child. Sometimes I'd come upon a picnic, and people would offer me some of their

soul food. They were puzzled when I turned them down on the grounds that I was a vegetarian.

But as alien as I was to these folks, they were just as alien to me.

As part of my heavy course load at the U of C, I began attending seminars where professors parsed the classic sociological questions: How do an individual's preferences develop? Can we predict human behavior? What are the long-term consequences, for instance, of education on future generations?

The standard mode of answering these questions was to conduct widespread surveys and then use complex mathematical methods to analyze the survey data. This would produce statistical snapshots meant to predict why a given person might, say, fail to land a job, or end up in prison, or have a child out of wedlock. It was thought that the key to formulating good policy was to first formulate a good scientific study.

I liked the questions these researchers were asking, but compared with the vibrant life that I saw on the streets of Chicago, the discussion in these seminars seemed cold and distant, abstract and lifeless. I found it particularly curious that most of these researchers didn't seem interested in meeting the people they wrote about. It wasn't necessarily out of any animosity—nearly all of them were well intentioned—but because the act of actually talking to research subjects was seen as messy, unscientific, and a potential source of bias.

Mine was not a new problem. Indeed, the field of sociology had long been divided into two camps: those who use quantitative and statistical techniques and those who study life by direct observation, often living among a group of people.

This second group, usually called ethnographers, use their first-



hand approach to answer a particular sort of question: How do people survive in marginal communities? for instance, or What makes a government policy work well for some families and not for others?

The quantitative sociologists, meanwhile, often criticized the ethnographers' approach. They argued that it isn't nearly scientific enough and that the answers may be relevant only to the particular group under observation. In other words, to reach any important and generalizable conclusion, you need to rely on the statistical analyses of large data sets like the U.S. Census or other massive surveys.

My frustration with the more scientific branch of sociology hadn't really coalesced yet. But I knew that I wanted to do something other than sit in a classroom all day and talk mathematics.

So I did what any sensible student who was interested in race and poverty would do: I walked down the hallway and knocked on the door of William Julius Wilson, the most eminent living scholar on the subject and the most prominent African American in the field of sociology. He had been teaching at the U of C for nearly twenty years and had published two books that reshaped how scholars and policy makers thought about urban poverty.

I caught Wilson just in time—he was about to go to Paris for a sabbatical. But he was also about to launch a new research project, he said, and I could participate if I liked.

Wilson was a quiet, pensive man, dressed in a dark blue suit. Although he had stopped smoking his trademark pipe long ago, he still looked like the kind of professor you see in movies. If you asked him a question, he'd often let several long moments of silence pass—he could be more than a little bit intimidating—before offering a thoughtful response.

Wilson explained that he was hoping to better understand how young blacks were affected by specific neighborhood factors: Did growing up as a poor kid in a housing project, for instance, lead to

worse educational and job outcomes than if a similarly poor kid grew up outside the projects? What about the difference between growing up in a neighborhood that was surrounded by other poor areas and growing up poor but near an affluent neighborhood? Did the latter group take advantage of the schools, services, and employment opportunities in the richer neighborhoods?

Wilson's project was still in the planning stages. The first step was to construct a basic survey questionnaire, and he suggested I help his other graduate students in figuring out which questions to ask. This meant going back to earlier studies of black youth to see what topics and questions had been chosen by earlier sociologists. Wilson gave me a box of old questionnaires. I should experiment, he said, by borrowing some of their questions and developing new ones as needed. Sociologists liked to use survey questions that their peers had already used, I learned, in order to produce comparable results. This was a key part of the scientific method in sociology.

I thanked Wilson and went to the library to begin looking over the questionnaires he'd given me. I quickly realized I had no idea how to interview anyone.

Washington Park, situated just across Cottage Grove Avenue from the U of C, is one of Chicago's stateliest parks. Designed in the 1870s by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it has a beautiful swimming pool, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, dazzling flower gardens, and long, winding paths that crisscross its nearly four hundred acres. I liked to go running on the clay track that encircled the park, a track that decades earlier had hosted horse and auto races. Until the 1940s the surrounding neighborhood was mainly Irish, but when black families started buying homes nearby, most of the white families moved away. I was always surprised that

**Extract 2 – Sudhir Venkatesh describes his first contact with the gang, the multiple choice survey technique he attempts to use, and explains why he chooses to change his methodological process.**

By now I was used to being observed carefully when I walked around a black neighborhood. Today was no different. As I approached one of the Lake Park projects, five or six young men stared me down. It should be said here that I probably deserved to be stared at. I was just a few months removed from a long stretch of time I'd spent following the Grateful Dead, and I was still under the spell of Jerry Garcia and his band of merry-makers. With my ponytail and tie-dyed shirt, I must have looked pretty out of place. I tended to speak in spiritually laden language, mostly about the power of road trips; the other grad students in my department saw me as a bit naïve and more than a little loopy. Looking back, I can't say they were wrong.

But I wasn't so naïve that I couldn't recognize what was going on in the lobby of the building that I now approached. Customers were arriving, black and white, by car and on foot, hurrying inside to buy their drugs and then hurrying back out. I wasn't sure if this building was Number 4040, and I couldn't find the number anywhere, so I just walked inside. The entryway smelled of alcohol, soot, and urine. Young men stood and crouched on plastic milk crates, a couple of them stomping their feet against the cold. I put my head down, took a breath, and walked past them quickly.

Their eyes felt heavy on me as I passed by. One huge young man, six foot six at least, chose not to move an inch as I passed. I brushed up against him and nearly lost my balance.

There was a long row of beaten-up metal mailboxes, many of them missing their doors. Water was dripping everywhere, puddling on the ground. Shouts and shrieks cascaded down from the higher floors, making the whole building feel like some kind of vibrating catacomb.

Once I got past the entryway, it was darker. I could make out the elevator, but I seemed to be losing any peripheral vision, and I couldn't find the button. I sensed that I was still being watched and

that I ought to press the button fast, but I groped around in vain. Then I started looking for the stairwell, but I couldn't find that either. To my left was a large barrier of some kind, but I was too nervous to go around it. To my right was a corridor. I decided to go that way, figuring I'd come across a stairwell or at least a door to knock on. As I turned, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

"What's up, my man, you got some business in here?" He was in his twenties, about as tall and dark as I was. His voice was deep and forceful but matter-of-fact, as if he asked the same question regularly. He wore baggy jeans, a loose-fitting jacket, and a baseball cap. His earrings sparkled, as did the gold on his front teeth. A few other young men, dressed the same, stood behind him.

I told them that I was there to interview families.

"No one lives here," he said.

"I'm doing a study for the university," I said, "and I have to go to Apartments 610 and 703."

"Ain't nobody lived in those apartments for the longest," he said. "Well, do you mind if I just run up there and knock on the door?"

"Yeah, we do mind," he said.

I tried again. "Maybe I'm in the wrong building. Is this 4040?"

He shook his head. "No one lives here. So you won't be talking to anybody."

I decided I'd better leave. I walked back through the lobby, bag and clipboard in hand. I crossed in front of the building, over an expansive patch of dead grass littered with soda cans and broken glass.

I turned around and looked back at the building. A great many of the windows were lit. I wondered why my new friend had insisted that the building was uninhabited. Only later did I learn that gang members routinely rebuffed all sorts of visitors with this line: "No one by that name lives here." They would try to prevent social work-

ers, schoolteachers, and maintenance personnel from coming inside and interrupting their drug trade.

The young men from the building were still watching me, but they didn't follow. As I came upon the next high-rise, I saw the faint markings on the pale yellow brick: Number 4040. At least now I was in the right place. The lobby here was empty, so I quickly skirted past another set of distressed mailboxes and passed through another dank lobby. The elevator was missing entirely—there was a big cavity where the door should have been—and the walls were thick with graffiti.

As I started to climb the stairs, the smell of urine was overpowering. On some floors the stairwells were dark; on others there was a muted glow. I walked up four flights, maybe five, trying to keep count, and then I came upon a landing where a group of young men, high-school age, were shooting dice for money.

"Nigger, what the fuck are you doing here?" one of them shouted. I tried to make out their faces, but in the fading light I could barely see a thing.

I tried to explain, again. "I'm a student at the university, doing a survey, and I'm looking for some families."

The young men rushed up to me, within inches of my face. Again someone asked what I was doing there. I told them the numbers of the apartments I was looking for. They told me that no one lived in the building.

Suddenly some more people showed up, a few of them older than the teenagers. One of them, a man about my age with an oversize baseball cap, grabbed my clipboard and asked what I was doing. I tried to explain, but he didn't seem interested. He kept adjusting his too-big hat as it fell over his face.

"Julio over here says he's a student," he told everyone. His tone

indicated he didn't believe me. Then he turned back to me. "Who do you represent?"

"Represent?" I asked.

"C'mon, nigger!" one of the younger men shouted. "We know you're with somebody, just tell us who."

Another one, laughing, pulled something out of his waistband. At first I couldn't tell what it was, but then it caught a glint of light and I could see that it was a gun. He moved it around, pointing it at my head once in a while, and muttered something over and over—"I'll take him," he seemed to be saying.

Then he smiled. "You do *not* want to be fucking with the Kings," he said. "I'd just tell us what you know."

"Hold on, nigger," another one said. He was holding a knife with a six-inch blade. He began twirling it around in his fingers, the handle spinning in his palm, and the strangest thought came over me: *That's the exact same knife my friend Brian used to dig a hole for our tent in the Sierra Nevadas.* "Let's have some fun with this boy," he said. "C'mon, Julio, where you live? On the East Side, right? You don't look like the West Side Mexicans. You flip right or left? Five or six? You run with the Kings, right? You know we're going to find out, so you might as well tell us."

*Kings or Sharks, flip right or left, five or six.* It appeared that I was Julio, the Mexican gang member from the East Side. It wasn't clear yet if this was a good or a bad thing.

Two of the other young men started to search my bag. They pulled out the questionnaire sheets, pen and paper, a few sociology books, my keys. Someone else patted me down. The guy with the too-big hat who had taken my clipboard looked over the papers and then handed everything back to me. He told me to go ahead and ask a question.



By now I was sweating despite the cold. I leaned backward to try to get some light to fall on the questionnaire. The first question was one I had adapted from several other similar surveys; it was one of a set of questions that targeted young people's self-perceptions.

"How does it feel to be black and poor?" I read. Then I gave the multiple-choice answers: "Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good."

The guy with the too-big hat began to laugh, which prompted the others to start giggling.

"Fuck you!" he told me. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

He turned away and muttered something that made everyone laugh uncontrollably. They went back to quarreling about who I was. They talked so fast that I couldn't easily follow. It seemed they were as confused as I was. I wasn't armed, I didn't have tattoos, I wasn't wearing anything that showed allegiance to another gang—I didn't wear a hat turned toward the left or right, for instance, I wasn't wearing blue or red, I didn't have a star insignia anywhere, either the five- or six-point variety.

Two of them started to debate my fate. "If he's here and he don't get back," said one, "you know they're going to come looking for him."

"Yeah, and I'm getting the first shot," said the other. "Last time I had to watch the crib. Fuck that. This time I'm getting in the car. I'm shooting some niggers."

"These Mexicans ain't afraid of shit. They kill each other in prison, over *nothing*. You better let me handle it, boy. You don't even speak Mexican."

"Man, I met a whole bunch of them in jail. I killed three just the other day."

As their claims escalated, so did their insults.

"Yeah, but your mama spoke Mexican when I was with her."

"Nigger, your *daddy* was a Mexican."

I sat down on a cold concrete step. I struggled to follow what they were talking about. A few of them seemed to think that I was an advance scout from a Mexican gang, conducting reconnaissance for a drive-by attack. From what I could glean, it seemed as if some black gangs were aligned with certain Mexican gangs but in other cases the black gangs and Mexican gangs were rivals.

They stopped talking when a small entourage entered the stairwell. At the front was a large man, powerfully built but with a boyish face. He also looked to be about my age, maybe a few years older, and he radiated calm. He had a toothpick or maybe a lollipop in his mouth, and it was obvious from his carriage that he was the boss. He checked out everyone who was on the scene, as if making a mental list of what each person was doing. His name was J.T., and while I couldn't have known it at this moment, he was about to become the most formidable person in my life, for a long time to come.

J.T. asked the crowd what was happening, but no one could give him a straight answer. Then he turned to me. "What are you doing here?"

He had a few glittery gold teeth, a sizable diamond earring, and deep, hollow eyes that fixed on mine without giving away anything. Once again, I started to go through my spiel: I was a student at the university, et cetera, et cetera.

"You speak Spanish?" he asked.

"No!" someone shouted out. "But he probably speaks Mexican!"

"Nigger, just shut the fuck up," J.T. said. Then someone mentioned my questionnaire, which seemed to catch his interest. He asked me to tell him about it.

I explained the project as best as I could. It was being overseen by a national poverty expert, I said, with the goal of understanding the lives of young black men in order to design better public policy.

My role, I said, was very basic: conducting surveys to generate data for the study. There was an eerie silence when I finished. Everyone stood waiting, watching J.T.

He took the questionnaire from my hand, barely glanced at it, then handed it back. Everything he did, every move he made, was deliberate and forceful.

I read him the same question that I had read the others. He didn't laugh, but he smiled. *How does it feel to be black and poor?*

"I'm not black," he answered, looking around at the others knowingly.

"Well, then, how does it feel to be African American and poor?" I tried to sound apologetic, worried that I had offended him.

"I'm not African American either. I'm a nigger."

Now I didn't know what to say. I certainly didn't feel comfortable asking him how it felt to be a nigger. He took back my questionnaire and looked it over more carefully. He turned the pages, reading the questions to himself. He appeared disappointed, though I sensed that his disappointment wasn't aimed at me.

"Niggers are the ones who live in this building," he said at last. "*African Americans* live in the suburbs. African Americans wear ties to work. Niggers can't find no work."

He looked at a few more pages of the questionnaire. "You ain't going to learn shit with this thing." He kept shaking his head and then glanced toward some of the older men standing about, checking to see if they shared his disbelief. Then he leaned in toward me and spoke quietly. "How'd you get to do this if you don't even know who we are, what we're about?" His tone wasn't accusatory as much as disappointed, and perhaps a bit bewildered.

I didn't know what to do. *Perhaps I should get up and leave?* But then he turned quickly and left, telling the young men who stayed behind to "watch him." Meaning me.

They seemed excited by how things had turned out. They had mostly stood still while J.T. was there, but now they grew animated. "Man, you shouldn't mess with him like that," one of them told me. "See, you should've just told him who you were. You might have been gone by now. He might have let you go."

"Yeah, you fucked up, nigger," another one said. "You really fucked this one up."

I leaned back on the cold step and wondered exactly what I had done to "fuck up." For the first time that day, I had a moment to ponder what had been happening. Random thoughts entered my mind, but, oddly, none of them concerned my personal safety: *What the hell is Bill Wilson going to do if he finds out about this? How am I supposed to know whether to address an interview subject as black, African American, or Negro? Did every Ph.D. student have to go through this? Can I go to the bathroom?* The sun had set, and it was getting colder. I pulled my jacket tighter and bent over, trying to keep out of the wintry draft.

Yol Freeze, you want one?"

An older man walked in with a grocery bag full of beers and offered a bottle to one of the young men guarding me. He passed out beers to everyone there. Pretty soon they were all in a better mood. They even gave me a bottle.

By now it was well into the evening. No one seemed to have anywhere to go. The young men just sat in the stairwell telling one another all kinds of stories: about sexual conquests, the best way to smoke a marijuana cigarette, schoolteachers they'd like to have sex with, the rising cost of clothing, cops they wanted to kill, and where they would go when their high-rise building was torn down. This last fact surprised me. Nothing in our records at the university suggested that these projects were closing.

"You have to leave?" I asked. "What kind of neighborhood will you be going to?"

"Nigger, did someone tell you to talk?" one of them said.

"Yeah, Julio," said another, moving in closer. "You ain't got no business here."

I shut my mouth for a while, but some other men stopped by, and they were more talkative. I learned that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was indeed tearing down the Lake Park projects in order to build condominiums and town houses. Some residents were staying on as squatters, and the gang was helping them by pirating electricity.

It was clear to me at this point that the young men I'd stumbled upon in this stairwell were junior members of a broad-based gang, the Black Kings, that sold crack cocaine. The older members explained that the gang was trying to forestall demolition but that it wasn't a pure act of charity: When this building was torn down, they would lose one of their best drug-selling locations.

Once in a while, I tried to interject a research question—What kinds of jobs did the people who lived here have? Why weren't the police in the building?—but they seemed less interested in answering me than in talking among themselves about sex, power, and money.

After a few hours, J.T. returned with a few other men, each of them carrying a grocery bag. More beer. It was late, and everyone seemed a little punchy. The air was stale, and some of the young men had been wondering when they might be able to leave. For the moment, however, the beer seemed to settle them down.

"Here," J.T. said, tossing me another bottle. Then he came closer.

"You know you're not supposed to be here," he said quietly. He

seemed to feel sorry for me and, at the same time, curious about my presence. Then he, too, began talking about the scheduled demolition of the Lake Park projects. He explained that he and his men had holed up in this building partly out of protest, joining the residents to challenge the housing authority's decision to kick them out.

Then he asked me where I was from.

"California," I said, surprised at the change in topic. "Born in India."

"Hm. So you don't speak Spanish."

"Actually, I do."

"See! I told you this nigger was a Mexican," said one young gangster, jumping up with a beer in his hand. "We should've beat his ass back then, man! Sent him back to his people. You know they're coming around tonight, you know they *will* be here. We need to get ready—"

J.T. shot the young man a look, then turned back to me. "You're not from Chicago," he said. "You should really not be walking through the projects. People can get hurt."

J.T. started tossing questions at me. What other black neighborhoods, he asked, was I going to with my questionnaire? Why do researchers use multiple-choice surveys like the one I was using? Why don't they just *talk* with people? How much money can you make as a professor?

Then he asked what I hoped to gain by studying young black people. I ticked off a few of the pressing questions that sociologists were asking about urban poverty.

"I had a few sociology classes," he said. "In college. Hated that shit."

The last word I expected to exit this man's mouth was "college." But there it was. I didn't want to push my luck, so I thought I'd just keep listening and hope for a chance to ask about his background.



By now everyone seemed fairly drunk and, more alarmingly, excited at the prospect of a gang war with the Mexicans. Some of the older men started talking logistics—where to station the gang members for the fighting, which vacant apartments could be used as lookout spots, and so on.

J.T. dismissed their belief that something was going to happen that night. Once again he ordered two of the younger men to stay with me. Then he left. I returned to my seat, sipping a beer now and then. It looked like I would be spending the night with them, so I tried to accept my fate. I was grateful when they said I could go to the bathroom—which, as it turned out, was another stairwell a few floors up. Considering that water, and probably urine, were constantly dripping onto our own landing, I wondered why they didn't use a lower floor instead.

The young men stayed up in the stairwell all night, drinking and smoking. Some of them strayed out to the balcony once in a while to see if any cars had pulled up to the building. One of them threw an empty beer bottle to the ground six stories down. The sound of broken glass echoing through the stairwell gave me a fright, but no one else even flinched.

Every so often a few new people came in, always with more beer. They talked vaguely about gang issues and the types of weapons that different gangs had. I listened as attentively as I could but stopped asking questions. Occasionally someone asked me again about my background. They all at last seemed convinced that I was not in fact a Mexican gang member, although some of them remained concerned that I "spoke Mexican." A few of them dozed off inadvertently, sitting on the concrete floor, their heads leaning against the wall.

I spent most of the night sitting on the cold steps, trying to avoid the protruding shards of metal. I would have liked to sleep also, but I was too nervous.

Finally J.T. came back. The early-morning sun was making its way into the stairwell. He looked tired and preoccupied.

"Go back to where you came from," he told me, "and be more careful when you walk around the city." Then, as I began gathering up my bag and clipboard, he talked to me about the proper way to study people. "You shouldn't go around asking them silly-ass questions," he said. "With people like us, you should hang out, get to know what they do, how they do it. No one is going to answer questions like that. You need to understand how young people live on the streets."

I was astounded at what a thoughtful person J.T. appeared to be. It seemed as if he were somehow invested in my succeeding, or at least considered himself responsible for my safety. I got up and headed for the stairs. One of the older men reached out and offered me his hand. I was surprised. As I shook his hand, he nodded at me. I glanced back and noticed that everyone, including J.T., was watching.

What are you supposed to say after a night like this? I couldn't think of anything worthwhile, so I just turned and left.

As I walked back to my apartment in Hyde Park, everything seemed fundamentally different. Crossing from one neighborhood to the next, I speculated about gang boundaries. When I saw a group of people huddled on a corner, I wondered if they were protecting their turf. I had a lot of questions: Why would anyone join a gang? What were the benefits? Didn't they get bored hanging out in stairwells—and how could anyone possibly stand the smell of