

The Gang

One summer during college, I and some roommates rented an apartment in Chester, a low-income city not far from Swarthmore. In the few miles between the two, a moat of golf courses separated the poverty of Chester from the affluent suburbs around the Swarthmore campus.

We settled in on East 11th Street. Squat, unadorned, boxy row houses, flush to the sidewalk, no space wasted on yards. At the time it was a visibly interracial neighborhood. Once we moved in, we discovered that the black residents were upwardly mobile recent arrivals, while the whites who remained were those who lacked the ability or resources to leave. We saw no obvious way to connect to either group; as brash undergraduates, our own social skills may not have been the greatest. At least it was a cheap summer rental.

A gang of black teenagers and young adults, always seen on the street corner, seemed friendly enough; we said “hi” and smiled, and they did the same. (They were a “gang” in the older sense of hanging around together on the street a lot; there were never any visible signs of criminal activity, unless you count loitering while black.) Not sure we belonged there, but there we were.

One evening a neighbor, who might have been one of the older members of the gang, started working on his car directly across the street from us. This was before air conditioning was common or affordable; everyone slept with upper-floor windows open in the hopes of a breeze that might moderate the Philadelphia area’s tropical summer temperatures. We were all too clear on his auto repair methods, which involved a four-step loop: 1) tinker with the carburetor with a screwdriver; 2) race the engine to see if it sounds fixed; 3) curse at the car; 4) drink some whiskey. Then repeat, again and again and again.

This is a challenging approach to auto repair. If you don’t fix it before your first three or four whiskeys, it becomes unlikely that you will ever fix it. Nonetheless, he continued late into the night, with engine racing and cursing impossible for anyone nearby to ignore, or sleep through.

Later the next day, as he resumed the identical four-step approach to auto repair, I went outside and spoke to him. I understand you want to work on your car, I said, but we didn’t get much sleep last night. Could you please agree to stop at a reasonable hour this evening? His response was along the lines of hrmph, hrmph, hrmph.

Back at home a few minutes later the doorbell rang, and I answered it. He grabbed and twisted my shirt, pulling me closer to him. Overwhelmed by his whiskey fumes, I heard him say, all run together as if a single word: “Mymotorcutsoutonme/I’mgonnaworkonit/Youcallthecops/I’llbustyourass.” It was the closest I have ever come to fainting. I collapsed backward, vaguely aware that he was no longer in my face or holding my shirt.

Soon the doorbell rang again. I opened the door, more cautiously this time. It was the rest of the gang from the corner, who had seen what was happening and pulled him off me. They wanted to apologize for his behavior, see if I was hurt, did I need any help. One of them exclaimed, in an outraged tone, “He had no call to talk to you like that. You behaved like a perfect gentleman!”

We became friends and hung out together for the rest of the summer. We drank some beer, we shot some pool. (The drinking age was 18 at the time.) Mr. Whiskey Motors was no longer part of their scene,

if he ever had been. East 11th Street didn't seem like a sketchy neighborhood at all, once the gang on the corner had shown they were ready to defend you.

I've tried to replay this story in my mind with the races reversed. A black college student moves into an urban neighborhood with a white gang on the street corner... I never get very far before the utter implausibility crashes in on me.

In the fall I got entirely reabsorbed into campus life and lost touch with my summer friends on East 11th Street. I'd like to wish them well, wherever they are now, and thank them again for the generous welcome they extended to a college student who wandered into their midst so many years ago.