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South Side

Caleb Bray

Our footsteps clunked along the sidewalk almost in unison. It was a cold evening on Chicago's south side, in a neighborhood I can't remember the name of but sure didn't feel like I belonged in. "Two

more blocks," my dad said. We had come to Chicago for Thanksgiving, my Dad, my cousin Jake and I. So far we had toured Michigan Avenue, the busiest street downtown, visited museums and ate deep dish pizza. On our left side, apartment buildings were erected for blocks on end; they were worn out and their lawns and shrubbery were unkempt. To our right across the street was a strip mall; closed at this time of day, with large signs screaming the name of the salon, electronics store and pizza joint. The streets weren't empty. Under almost every other lamp post or in front any fast food joint, people were huddled outside. Attending to whatever business they had in front of a McDonalds at 9 o'clock at night. We turned left on a similar sized street, footsteps a little less in unison now. "There it is," my father said.

The sun was just setting, and we were a block away from the tram. It was cold this time of year, much colder than anything I had felt in Texas. The cold air pierced my coat, sweater, and undershirt. Freezing my bare skin and warm blood underneath. But we moved on nonetheless. My dad was on one of the numerous business trips he would take each year, and my cousin and I were along for the ride. Jake, is my Aunt's son; he is a few years older than I but never asserted it in anyway. The tram station nearest our hotel was well kept and clean as was most everything in downtown Chicago. We scanned our cards and boarded the next train going south. I was raised in the suburbs, in Frisco, Texas. I was not accustomed to big, sprawling cities let alone rundown neighborhoods, which were numerous on the south side of Chicago, where we were headed. This was an entirely new experience to me. The majority of the ride there was filled with humorous conversation between us three. We had been riding for fifteen minutes, when the buildings below us started to grow distinctly different from the skyscrapers and classic architecture of downtown. The streets were not bustling, there were no men in suits and ties taking calls on their newest Blackberry. Rather, autumn colored leaves

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littered the sidewalks and vines grew on the side of each apartment building. It was our stop, my Dad took the lead and exited the train, with Jake and I soon following.

"There it is." Jake and I looked up and saw the Church's Chicken. The LED backed logo on the store front cut through the night sky; featuring red, blue and yellow that snatched my attention. We crossed the street where a few men hung out in front of the store. They were drinking out of some Church's cups and talking, but I felt their eyes pierce through me as we opened the door and walked

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inside. The air was warm, and the scent of hot oil, fried chicken, spices and honey butter biscuits filled the air. I snapped out of my food filled trance, and took a look around me. Not one person wore Nike brand shoes like I was or a thirty-dollar beanie from NFLshop.com. I felt like an outsider. "Find a seat, boys," Dad said. Jake and I sat in a corner booth farthest away from most of the Chicagoan patrons. A few men were gathered around the soda machine, and a few booths down a man and woman sat side by side, looking right at us, and then back

Boxes A.J. Sanchez



at each other when I made eye contact with them. I felt uneasy, remembering stories my dad would tell me of awful neighborhoods in cities he visited, and tales of hearing gunshots outside while conducting his business. Minutes felt like hours and all I could focus on outside of conversation with my cousin were the cracked tile floors littered with crumbs; not to mention the overflowing, dilapidated trash cans. I wish I had some cards or a Nintendo like Jake did to make me feel more at home. But no, I sat there, bored and intimidated by my surroundings. I remember thinking of home and the mornings where I would put my clothes in the dryer to warm them up before braving the chilly walk to the bus stop. I thought to myself, "There are no subdivisions here. There are no 10 high schools to a school district; the people here lived a harder life." I was coming to the realization that I didn't really live in the real world.

"Come on boys, let's get out of here," Dad said, startling me. We walked the same path on cracked sidewalks back to the train, then up a narrow set of stairs to the station itself. As we turned toward the platform we came across some lockers.

Bang! Bang! Bang! I tensed up, and adrenaline chilled my spine and neck. A muscular man in a tattered hoodie and sweatpants stood in our path, punching a set of lockers with his bare hands as if he was Apollo Creed pummeling Rocky Balboa in the early rounds of their second fight. The sweat glistened off his forehead, and blood had been smeared on this particular locker as the skin on his knuckles wore away. I couldn't begin to imagine what drove this man to do what he was doing. Who in their sane mind, mindlessly

pummels a set of lockers in a train station during the dead of night? The scene was raw and visceral; I definitely lost innocence in this moment. Who knew 30 seconds in a train station would change my perspective so drastically? Despite this we moved past him, and boarded a train back to Chicago. I sat in a seat, separate from my father and cousin, and thought once more about my home and what I just witnessed. It was humbling to say the least. There were moments of awe and terror, but I gained valuable perspective from the experiences. Perspective that I could not have gained elsewhere.

The train gained momentum and took us through a tunnel. When we came out the other side, my eyes were fixed through the window, where the buildings grew nicer and taller once again.



Their Eyes Were Watching God Robin Horst