

One Gang Material

In the 1960's, my elementary school brothers and I grew up admiring the cars they drove. They were black and white with a little bubblegum machine on top.

“Fuckin pigs!” is what my older brothers would yell at them, words intended to be disrespectful. But they seemed unruffled, caring very little. This stirred questions inside me. Where are these people manufactured, and what compels them? Their composure seemed unyielding, especially during the insurmountable suffering of others in their time of extreme sorrow. They own a franchise on the highest rates of suicide, yet unlawful activity keeps these guys racing from tragedy to crisis day in and day out.

Their exciting and exhilarating line of business, experts say, could be the cause of a developmental operative weakness, one that gives them an inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances at home. Be that as it may, what we termed as exciting and exhilarating was, to the police, Tuesday.

Ty, Peter and I sat in front of the television set watching a local kid's show. It was called Sheriff John; he sang songs, and announced cartoons and children's birthdays. Mama's telephone rang. It seemed every time it did, it was for my oldest sister Dorothy Lynn. She lived on the telephone.

“Hello?” Dorothy Lynn paused to listen, seconds later. “Just a moment please, I'll get her.” Then she held the telephone receiver out for Mama. “It's the police department calling for Doris Robinson,” said Dorothy Lynn.

Drawn away from the power of Felix the Cat and Ricochet Rabbit, we watched Mama grab the telephone.

“This is Doris Robinson,” she said.

“Ma’am, this is the Los Angeles Police Department. We have your son Lonnie ‘Rap’ Robinson in custody. He’s been arrested for auto theft. We need you to come to the police station.”

Mama was stunned; the news stung her like a bee sting. She didn’t know how to respond. “I’ll be right there,” she said. She immediately telephoned Louise. “Sister, I hate to ask you but Rap’s been arrested.”

When Ty, Peter and I heard Mama tell Aunt Louise the news that Rap had been arrested again, we weren’t surprised. We were just a little disconcerted that we were not going to see him again for a while.

“Good-nis, Doris!” Louise yelled.

Mama continued, “He’s being held for auto theft and I need a ride.”

“Those kids need discipline Doris,” said Louise, certainly not for the first time.

“I know, I know,” said Mama. “But why is it the other kids, Larry, Jimmy, and Dorothy Lynn, know how to steer away from trouble?”

“That’s the mystery of it,” Louise said. “You raise ‘em in the same cage, feed ‘em the same food and they turn out totally different. I learned that one size don’t fit all. Some kids need special attention. I can take you to the police station, but I won’t be able to stay. I have to go to work right after.”

Once Mama arrived at the station, she sat in the waiting room for at least an hour. A stream of other people had their complaints heard by the sergeant then it was Mama’s turn.

“I’m Doris Robinson. I got a call that my son Lonnie Robinson is being held here. Can I see him and talk to somebody who can tell me what happened?” The sergeant looked down at his desk and began flipping through the pages of his binder.

“Let’s see, Robinson, Robinson, here it is, Lonnie ‘Rap’ Robinson.” The sergeant pressed the intercom button on his desk.

“Desk to booking,” he said.

“Booking, go ahead.”

“Lonnie ‘Rap’ Robinson’s mother is here to see him.”

“10-4 we’ll send someone out to receive her,” replied the booking clerk.

The desk sergeant handed Mama a temporary clip-on visitor’s pass.

“Here, Mrs. Robinson,” he said. “Clip this visitor’s pass to your blouse in plain view. Someone will take you to see him. Detective Lemoore has been waiting to talk to you.”

Mama was taken to a booth, on the other side Rap was brought out wearing a pair of handcuffs. He was placed in a seat and talked to Mama from behind the security glass.

“Tell me you didn’t hurt anybody, son,” said Mama.

With tears in his eyes, Rap spoke to her. “No, Mama, they said I stole a car but I got it from my friend named Michael, Mama. He’s always at the park. I went up there in the morning to ask him if I could use his car.”

“Use his car? Use his car? Rap you’re 16 years old with no license!” By now she was raising her voice.

“I saw police cars driving next to me, then they got behind me. I got scared when they turned on the red light so I jumped.”

“You jumped?” asked Mama.

“Out of the car, Mama,” said Rap. “I ran but they caught me and started pointing their guns at me.”

Mama was in awe as she held her face in her hands. “You ran and they didn’t shoot? You mustn’t run. I heard they shoot people who run.”

Rap’s eyes got big. He became frightened and began to yell.

“You gotta get me outta here, Mama!” When Rap got loud, the guard’s ears perked up and he approached Rap. Feeling helpless, Mama just threw up her hands and shook her head. “I don’t wanna scare you, son, but chur growing up, and I’m, I’m just losing control of you. The only thing I can do is pray and hope you learned something from all this.”

Detective Lemoore stepped into the room. He was smoking a cigarette. He walked over to where Mama was sitting and looked at the guards. “It’s okay, please give me a minute,” he asked them. The guards stepped back.

Detective Lemoore was a tall white man with dark hair that he wore combed straight back. He wore brown cowboy boots with large heels and metal tips. Inside the waiting room, he grabbed a chair and moved it next to the seat where Mama was sitting.

“Ma’am, my name is Detective Mark Lemoore. I was assigned your son Rap’s case. I also worked on your other son, Neon’s, case. Do you mind if I join you?”

“Please, do,” said Mama.

Lemoore sat down and continued. “I tried to reach you when I got the case but got no answer.”

“I was working,” Mama told Detective Lemoore. “It’s so hard being a single parent,” she said.

“I completely understand, ma’am, would you like me to fill you in on what happened?”

“Yes,” she said, “I already heard my son’s version.”

“I don’t think mine differs too much from his. The report says that while our officers were out on patrol, they passed a vehicle that appeared to be driven by a little kid. The officers made a u-turn and advised the dispatcher that they were behind the vehicle. Due to the driver’s youthful appearance, they ran a check on the license plate. It surely doesn’t look like Rap is old enough to drive a car, ma’am.” They both paused to look at him.

“He knows he ain’t old enough to drive no car,” said Mama. Overcome with shame, Rap closed his eyes and dropped his head.

Detective Lemoore continued. “Dispatch advised the officers that the vehicle was confirmed stolen, so other officers responded. Sometimes, without the parents knowing, kids will take their parents’ car out for a joyride, then replace it before the parents can find out.”

“They actually take their parents car out and replace it without them noticing?” she asked.

“Believe me, it happens all over America,” he said. “Sometimes they get caught. We thought Rap was joyriding the family car. When the officers got closer, Rap jumped from the driver’s seat of the stolen vehicle while it was still in motion.” Detective

Lemoore shook his head. "That is a very dangerous thing to do. Kids don't jump out and purposely let their dad's car roll down the street."

He continued, "Rap ran from the scene while the driverless moving vehicle was rolling down the street unoccupied until it came to rest, striking a parked car. Rap ran onto the freeway with officers in foot pursuit. The officers caught up to your son in the ice plant area near the freeway off ramp and took him into custody at gunpoint. He was later identified as your son, Rap. Rap agreed to talk to us and he told you himself what happened. He's been honest and that can help his case. I called you here to tell you that he has been booked into juvenile hall."

"Detective, please lemme just take him home, I promise nothing like this will ever happen again."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Robinson but this is not a first offense for Rap, he's offended before. These current charges against him put any chance for that outta my hands."

Detective Lemoore called the guards to take Rap back to lock-up. As Rap was escorted away, he said, "I'm sorry, I love you, Mama." Mama touched the partition between them and blew him a kiss as they led him away.

Detective Lemoore escorted Mama to the door of the building. Before stepping out, Mama stopped. She was embarrassed by Rap's behavior.

"Detective," she said earnestly. "I apologize for my son's behavior, I'm trying to raise him the best that I know how."

"Mrs. Robinson, your attitude confirms my belief that all is not lost. Most parents accuse us of making a case against their children. They're just living in a state of denial. If you don't mind me asking, Mrs. Robinson, where is his dad?"

“He stopped being a dad long ago,” she said. “He inn’t around any longer.”

“I’ve been a cop twenty-eight years and during that time I have seen three generations of Los Angelino children grow to adulthood. If I arrest ten kids, nine of them had no dad at home. Those same kids had no direction, no enrichment type activities to keep them occupied, no discipline, and, as a result, no respect for the law. If there’s one thing I learned, it’s that if you don’t discipline your children, the criminal justice system will, and they won’t do it with love. Most of those kids I mentioned are now adults. They are either in gangs, in jail, living on the streets homeless, or dead. Discipline starts at home.”

“So you’re telling me that Rap and Neon got arrested because they had no dad at home, and I didn’t spank them?” asked Mama.

“Strong mothers don’t necessarily require a dad in the house. Spankings are not against the law—abuse is,” said Detective Lemoore. “Any self-respecting cop worth his salt will applaud a well-deserved spanking, it makes our job easier. When children obey their parents, they respond better to authority. Rap and Neon have already passed the age where a spanking would do them any good. But it makes an impression on children less than ten or twelve years old. I’d like to show you something. Can you come with me?”

Detective Lemoore used his key to open the security door to the divisional offices of the LAPD and he and Mama entered. They walked across the shiny tiled floors, and down the hallway. They passed by the doors of several divisions of the Los Angeles Police Department: the Child Abuse Division, the Robbery Division, the Vice Division, and the Homicide Division. People were busy working at their desks. Detective Lemoore and Mama entered through a door marked Auto Theft Division. It was a large room with

several cubicles. Detective Lemoore stopped at a desk where the nameplate bore his name. On one side of the desk was a chair that he pulled out in front.

“Have a seat,” he said as he walked around the desk and sat down. “The City of Los Angeles is faced with a dilemma. Gang violence is on the upswing.” On his desk was an eight by ten photograph of what looked like his wife and children, sitting right next to an ashtray full of ashes and cigarette butts. He reached into his desk drawer and removed a folder.

“I have been compiling statistics on undisciplined youth,” he said as he opened the folder. “I’ve tracked, profiled, and categorized every juvenile arrest in the Los Angeles area for the past ten years. Then I supplemented these statistics with the census study of the projected rate of augmentation in the greater metropolitan Los Angeles area and...”

“Detective,” Mama said, “I don’t mean to interrupt, but I have no idea what you are talking about. Can you make it simple?”

“I’m sorry,” said Detective Lemoore. “Simply put, the statistics in that folder represent thousands of cases. There is a very high probability that in the next ten years we are going to be faced with an epidemic of gang violence. In the next twenty years,” continued Lemoore, “that number will double. By the year 1990, there will be approximately twenty thousand juvenile gang members living in the Los Angeles area alone. People will be afraid to walk to the store in the inner city.”

“My boys? In a gang?” asked Mama.

“If they aren’t now, statistically the probability of them joining one exists,” said Lemoore. “Senior officials in law enforcement know this information because it’s based

upon these statistics. Undisciplined inner city youth raised in single parent homes are more likely to become gangsters. It has happened time and time again, generation after generation.”

“Mrs. Robinson,” he continued, “you’ve already shown me that you are not a mother in denial so I’ll be frank with you, your boys are gang material.”

Mama dropped her head, then looked up. “What can I do about it?”

“That’s the dilemma. But the answer is really quite simple, yet parents can’t or won’t do it. We insist that our children do three things: their chores, their homework, and obey their parents. Your job is to keep them occupied. Anybody who is successful today had these three things required of them while growing up.”

“And if they’re disobedient?” Mama asked.

“It’s not enough to ask them, we must insist and not feel guilty or feel afraid to spank them if they need it. Bleeding hearts may disagree but if a child grows into adulthood after being raised under those guidelines, and then decides to start criminal behavior, it probably won’t last long because it’s not how they were raised. When you think about it, it’s really not a tough choice,” he said.

Rap eventually went to court, and was found guilty. The judge said because he endangered lives of innocent citizens by letting the car roll, instead of 12 months, he was sentenced to 18 months in juvenile hall.

Juvenile hall was not new to Rap. After being searched, like his younger brother he was marched through the recreation yard. The yard was like walking into a weight training gym. The barbells, dumbbells, pull-up bars, and weight lifting benches were occupied by sweaty youths of all ethnic groups but most of them were black. They were

intensely putting the equipment into effect. Rap's younger brother, Neon, who was still serving his sentence for arson, was also on the yard getting his daily workout. He said nothing, just watched and grinned from ear to ear as his brother was led onto the grounds. Once Rap was left in the cell, Neon asked if he could speak to his brother.

"What's happening, cat?" Neon asked. "Mama told me that you were coming here."

"I wasn't trying to make this scene, Neon,"

"How long you been in here now?"

"About a year-and-a-half."

"Don't worry, I got a crew in here called the Bloods. I'm their leader."

"You? Their leader?"

"I know, it's wacky."

"The Bloods, huh? You make that up?" asked Rap.

"Ha, ha, yeah!" replied Neon. "Don't worry bout nothing, when they find out that you're my brother, you'll get the same respect I do."

Neon handed his brother a neatly folded red bandana. "What's this?" asked Rap.

"It's the color of Blood, brotha," said Neon.

The next day, the Eastside gang was standing in the yard in a little group, talking among themselves. It had been over a month, Neon never gave Rico an answer regarding a cut of his candy for a cut of Rico's smuggled in cigarettes.

Rico turned and walked toward Neon's huddle, his crew following behind. Rico stepped into the inner circle, and looked at Neon like a hungry tiger looking at his prey.

"It's been a while, I'm ready for an answer. Are we forming an alliance or not?"

Neon stood up and stuck out his chest.

“If it’s one thing I hate, it’s some candy-assed El Stinko looking for dibs.”

It was the ultimate disrespect. Rico fired back.

“If it’s one thing *I* hate, it’s skinny *mijates*,” said Rico as he looked at the Bloods.

Both crews took a fighting stance. “I’m tired of this shit!” said Rico.

Kelso, Neon’s number one man, saw Rico spouting venom. He knew something was about to happen so he summoned all the Bloods via the word-of-mouth network.

“They make noises like they’re the big badasses in charge. This is my house. It’s where me and mi vatos live. We not gonna let no *mijates* come in and bogart. The blacks are making too much profit,” declared Rico as he started to swell up his chest.

“I hate to be the one to disappoint you and your bean wagon, but you ain’t gonna be coming up in here and telling us nothing!”

“Bloods! Bloods! Bloods!” Neon yelled. His head rotated left to right as he yelled out. The entire yard surrounded Rico and his little Eastside crew. There were too many Bloods. Rico’s Eastside boys were no match for them.

“I got the gat pointed at you, Rico, you and your whole taco wagon. You got two choices,” said Neon. “I get your supply of smokes or I drop the hammer on your ass. Right here, right now!”

Rico looked left and right, realizing now that the risk he took would not work out the way he’d planned. “Alright, vatu, you win, for now.”

Rico and his Eastsiders were allowed to walk away. Rap knew about cigarettes and how to smoke them. He began experimenting with cigarettes when Neon first went to

the hall. The first time Rap had smoked, the older boys in the neighborhood had played a trick on him. Their trick made Rap choke when he inhaled, but it was all in fun.

Neon and Rap began to extort Rico's supply of cigarettes. Rap knew that Neon had never smoked a cigarette before. While the guards were occupied, Rap came out on the yard, and placed a cigarette into Neon's mouth. He struck a match and lit the cigarette.

"Puff on it," said Rap. "Get some smoke in your mouth." Neon sucked on the cigarette, his jaws fat as they filled up with smoke. "Now, shake it around like mouthwash, give it a good swash back and fourth," said Rap. Neon threw the smoke from side to side. "That's it Neon, now inhale." Neon opened his mouth and inhaled. His eyes widened as he felt the burn of hot soured smoke entering his virgin lungs. It began to choke him, blood rushed to his head. He began to gag, the burn felt like someone had shoved a red-hot poker down his esophagus. Neon tried to clear his throat but it burned like hell.

Neon doubled over, choking and hacking, trying to clear the stale smoke out of his lungs. Five minutes later, Neon was still coughing. He looked around the yard for the guard. Each time he coughed, his throat felt raw. Neon tried to talk as he cleared the smoke from his lungs. "People, ahh yew! People like this shit?" asked Neon as he coughed and spat.

"Well," said Rap, unable to stop laughing, "okay, they don't shake the smoke around in their mouth like that. I added that just to rattle your cage."

The blood had cleared from Neon's head and he was beginning to come back to normal. "Aw yew! You're cruising for a bruising, bruh."

“Damn, cat,” said Rap, “don’t be a wet rag. The first time I smoked a cigarette they pulled that one on me too.”

“That’s wrong, man!” said Neon as he continued coughing and clearing his throat.

“I had to give you a quick high to show what these cigarettes are all about. You feel high, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do, I feel a rush,” said Neon.

“That’s what you get with these, and then you get used to it.”

Rap and Neon were now not only in control of the candy, but Rico’s supply of cigarettes as well. The Bloods would continue their operation inside the walls of juvenile hall until the day of their probation.

It wasn’t until I was much older that the answers to the questions that stirred inside me became evident. We were, “Urbanites,” inner city creatures in a dog-eat-dog environment. A place where criminal behavior, drugs, prostitution and other subcultures of the human condition spawned. If not for the power of the authorities, these ills of society would go uncontrolled and allowed to breed at a pace too fast to slow down.

From this era the infamous street gangs of today were formed. For four decades, the Bloods waged war against a street gang known today as the Crips, forging the greatest American dilemma facing the country today, the scourge of gang violence.