CHAPTER 3

GHETTO HEAVEN

IN THE SUMMER OF 1973, MY GRANDFATHER DECIDED TO sell the house on Jamaica Street. He was having problems with us as tenants. Joe had car parts on the back porch, the cellar was looking like a teen clubhouse with mattresses and couches thrown about and glow-in-the-dark paint on the walls, and we were always using some pancake griddle invention of Joe's that Grandpa said was a fire hazard. He took everything he didn't like out to the backyard and stomped on it, making a statement obvious to all of us. We were out. Ma didn't know what we'd do. We had no place to go that we could afford, and she was sure we'd end up once again in a place like Columbia Point.

One day after a trip to the beach in South Boston, Ma walked through the Old Colony Housing Project in Southie and talked to some old friends who'd moved there from Columbia Point. She spotted an empty apartment at 8 Patterson Way and went right into the office of Dapper O'Neil, a local city counselor, who has since acquired a reputation in Boston as a bigot, often making public statements about blacks and whites staying separate. But he also has a strong record for constituent services, for doing anything he can for

families in trouble, regardless of their race. Dapper saw that Ma was in an emergency situation with eight kids and no money and nowhere to live, and pulled a few strings for us to get the apartment at 8 Patterson Way.

Ma was thrilled, as if she'd died and gone to heaven by getting a place in the all-white South Boston housing projects. She yelled up to all the neighbors on Jamaica Street that we'd struck a great bit of luck, six rooms for eighty dollars a month, heat, light, and gas included, and it's all white—we wouldn't have to go back to the black projects! I didn't know why the white thing was so important. While I'd become familiar with the nightmarish stories from Columbia Point, my own experience had been that we got along much better with the black kids in Jamaica Plain, who seemed to have more in common with us than the other kids with Irish parents.

We drove into Old Colony in one of Joe's shitboxes, with a few mattresses tied to the top of the roof, and each of us carrying a garbage bag full of clothes and canned goods. We rolled slowly through the maze of red bricks, checking out the neighborhood, with its groups of young mothers sitting on the stoops, rocking their baby carriages back and forth. Kids splashed in wading pools on the hot summer day, while gangs of teenage boys huddled on street corners, shirtless and with rolled-up bellbottoms, no socks, and expensive sneakers. An occasional man would stroll down the street, more than one with a bottle in a brown paper bag. I knew what was in the bag because that was how my Aunt Nellie kept her booze hidden when she wanted to drink outside.

They all stopped whatever they were doing to watch us coming down the street. Tough-looking teenagers approached the car, standing apart from the crowd as if to challenge anyone willing to take them on. My mother just kept smiling and waving at all our new neighbors. She pointed to all the shamrock graffiti and IRA and IRISH POWER spray painted everywhere, and said it looked just like Belfast and that we were in the best place in the world. She walked up to people and talked to them, trying to get in on their

conversations. The other mothers couldn't help answering her questions, but they remained standoffish, not wanting anyone to think they'd be welcoming outsiders into the private world of Old Colony. Neighbors watched our every move from windowsills and doorsteps, and I was scared.

I'd seen tough-looking people before. But these were white, like us. There were a couple of young people in wheelchairs, people with deformities, and one teenager with recent stab wounds in his stomach. While we carried bags and mattresses up to our third-floor apartment, larger groups of teenagers began to gather. A group of girls about Mary's age stared her down and muttered something about her being a "nigger lover" (Mary still had her Afro). She stepped up to them and told them to speak up and say it to her face. They all kept quiet. The local boys laughed and tried to instigate a fight. My mother just kept smiling and waving at everyone in the midst of the tense atmosphere. Calling "Hey, how ya doin'?" up to people in windows, as if she'd known them her whole life long. She figured that they were all Irish, all in the same boat as she and her kids, and besides, she had to make this work. She carried up her accordion and warned everyone that she'd be playing a few tunes tonight on the front steps.

We went into the apartment and started to paint the walls with the paint the maintenance office had left for us. It was the same color that all of the walls already were: that glaring green that I'd seen at Mass Mental. We brought out the rollers and brushes, and I got busy painting the bathroom as soon as possible, before my mother could take on the job and do her usual scheme of painting every inch of the bathroom the same color, including the ceilings, floor, toilet, sink, and bathtub. She always did this, and within weeks we'd have big white spots on our tub and sink, where the paint had started to chip and peel. I painted the four walls and left signs up for nobody to touch the wet paint, and for nobody to paint the toilet.

Ma came out of one of the rooms carrying a pointy brown bug with a coat of armor and antennas waving in all directions. Ma said

it was a cockroach, that we'd had them in Columbia Point, and that I'd better get used to them because the place was loaded with them. She wanted to get to know some of the neighbors and she figured that the cockroach might be a good conversation piece to bond over. She knocked on the neighboring apartment door and asked the woman who answered if the bug she was holding in her palm was really a cockroach. The woman looked disgusted and wouldn't open her door more than a crack, saying she wouldn't know what it was, or what a cockroach looked like, that she'd never seen one in her life. Then she slammed the door. Ma came back laughing, saying the woman was a phony bitch, "And how could someone live in the project and not know what a cockroach looked like?" I was worried that the neighbors would start blaming us for bringing all the cockroaches into Old Colony, for loads of them had started staggering out of the walls and cabinets, dazed by the smell of paint. Ma said that the new paint would chase them out of our house for a couple of weeks, loading up the woman next door with them. "And that'll show her what a cockroach is!"

The kid on the first floor was friendly and offered to carry some bags up for us. He was my age, and my mother dragged him upstairs to show me my new friend. We both went downstairs and sat on the front stoop of 8 Patterson, and he laid out the rules of the neighborhood. He told me I'd have to get in a few fistfights before I became part of the neighborhood, that I'd better not be thinking about bringing niggers or spics over from Jamaica Plain, and to never ever rat on anyone to the cops. Danny was a good kid and was trying to look out for me. I wondered if I'd have to fight the teenage boys whose teeth were already knocked out, and who were now staring up at our windows. He assured me that they wouldn't bother me. They'd be waiting to jump my older brothers. "They'd never mess with anyone smaller than them." Those were the rules.

Just then, Danny's mother came out of her apartment screaming and calling him a "cocksucker" because there was no Pepsi in the house, and why hadn't he gone out to the store earlier, when she told

him to. She was carrying a butcher knife. "I'll cut the fucking dick right off of ya," she shouted loud enough for the whole street to hear. He ran from the front stoop, disappearing down one of the tunnels that cut through the maze of brick buildings, and soon returned with a bottle of Pepsi. When he came outside again, he had his four-year-old brother with him, and his mother screamed for the two of them to go fuck themselves and slammed her door.

Danny forced a chuckle and shrugged his shoulders, and asked me if I wanted to go to the park with him and his little brother, Robbie. I went upstairs to tell Ma where I was going, and found her on her hands and knees painting the toilet and sink, including the pipes that carried water into them. I gave up on explaining why we couldn't paint certain parts of the bathroom, and went off with Danny and Robbie. He showed me Carson Beach, and drew a line in the sand right about where we weren't supposed to cross over into "Niggerville." Just across that line was the black beach, and Columbia Point Housing Project about fifty yards away. He told me all about Columbia Point, and how there were all these blacks living there with no teeth, bottles of booze in paper bags, and guns and knives. I didn't dare tell him that I was born there. When we went home, we bought a can of tonic to share and put it in a brown paper bag, laughing and pretending it was booze, just like the blacks, and the guys in Old Colony, and my own Aunt Nellie.

We hung out in front of J.J.'s Liquors drinking our fake booze until a group of kids our age came walking by. They said hi to Danny, but one of them bumped into me with his shoulder, backed up, and threw his two arms up in the air saying, "I offer you out." I had no idea what this meant, but it sounded too polite to be coming from a kid with a black eye and a scowl on his face. Danny told me this meant the kid wanted to fight me. I put up my two fists the way my brother Frankie'd taught me, one for defense and one for offense, and stood in the boxer pose with one foot forward. He kicked me in the balls and when I was bent over he pulled my T-shirt over my head and started beating me with anything he could pick up: sticks,

rocks, and the beer cans that littered the street. The other kids formed a circle around us, and Danny and Robbie were the only ones cheering me on. Some adults came out of the liquor store to take sides as well. When they saw a cop car pull up, the adults chased us all back into the project across the street, calling us little bastards. We ran in all different directions.

My older brothers were pissed off that I'd lost a fight, and Frankie started to schedule daily boxing lessons for me. I'd have to meet him every day after school to start punching the bag. Frankie told me I'd soon be able to beat the hell out of Brian Noonan, the kid in front of the liquor store. There came a time when I believed I could beat him, and wanted to prove it in a street fight, but by then I didn't know how to "offer out" someone I had, by then, nothing against. Brian and I had become friends, the day after our fight, which was nothing more than my initiation into Southie's housing projects.

My brothers and sisters had their own initiations to face. One day, Mary and her friends from Jamaica Plain were taking me to the park. We began to pass through one of the tunnels that cut through the courtyards of Old Colony, and we saw a gang of girls lined up against both sides of the tunnel wall. When Mary and the two girls from J.P. passed them, the Old Colony girls jumped them from behind. Mary grabbed two of the girls by the hair and banged their heads against the brick wall. Then, holding on only to another girl's hair, Mary flung her body against the wall. This was the leader of the group, Sally Duggan, a neighbor. After this, word spread not to mess with Mary, and she became accepted among the tough crowd.

But we still had a hard time from the boys in the neighborhood. Within the first week of moving into Old Colony, a bottle came through the open window of one of our bedrooms and smashed against the wall. When we looked out we saw a group running through the back courtyard laughing and slapping each other five. Later in the day, the same group was outside in front of our building, leaning against cars and pointing up to our windows. They were

drinking beer, and in the sweltering heat they'd taken their shirts off and tucked them into the back pockets of their rolled-up dungarees. Johnnie, Joe, and Frank decided to go downstairs to face them. They walked slowly out of our building with their own shirts off. My brothers were built—they'd been bodybuilding—and each of them carried a machete at his side. They walked right up to the crowd of scrawny toughs and asked which one had something to say. Ma was up in the third-floor window and pointed out which one had thrown the bottle, and he tore down the street yelling back at my brothers, threatening them with names of gangsters that meant nothing to us yet. My brothers came back upstairs once it was clear that no one else had anything more to say to them.

The next day, a neighbor tipped us off that the boys from Old Colony had called their friend Freddy Callaghan, a known street thug and a murderer, about us. We'd heard that he'd recently walked into a bar in Andrew Square and shot up the place in retaliation for his own brother's murder, which had never been solved. Freddy Callaghan was planning to come over that night, a neighbor told us, to give us a lesson in real Southie street justice. Freddy was known to carry a gun, and someone said he'd definitely shoot all our windows out. Ma went to his older brother, who said there was nothing he could do about him. Freddy was gone in the head, he said.

Ma went into nearby D Street Housing Project that day with her new boyfriend, Coley, and bought a double-barreled shotgun from an apartment there. Things were heating up around our place in Old Colony, and Ma walked right up the steps to our building, shotgun in plain view, so all the sightseers would know that she and her kids weren't to be fucked with. At sundown she called a taxi to get "the three little kids"—me, Kevin, and Kathy—out of town. We'd have to spend the night at Grandpa and Nana's in West Roxbury, where they'd moved from Jamaica Plain. Davey, who was now making weekend visits home from Mass Mental, would come with us. A crowd had gathered outside 8 Patterson Way by the time the taxi

pulled up. The three of us little kids and Davey walked out of the building while Ma sat up in the window, keeping us covered with the shotgun. As we drove through Old Colony, we noticed that some of the local toughs were following our taxi, taking shortcuts from courtyard to courtyard. Davey yelled for us all to hit the floor, and we did.

Our grandparents were confused by our arrival out of the blue. My aunts Leena and Sally were still single and living at home with Nana and Grandpa, and one of them called Ma to find out what was going on. Ma told them, and they all began pacing the floors and looking out the window to see if the "gangsters from Southie" had followed us there. Davey kept retelling the story, expanding each time, until my aunts' shrieking questions made us feel as if we'd all die tonight for sure.

Things calmed down a bit as the evening wore on. We'd called Ma and she'd said that Freddy Callaghan had come and gone, after circling our building a few times. We all finally got to sleep. At about three in the morning, we awoke to the screams of Sally and Nana. They were crying, saying that we'd been followed, that there was someone banging at the front door downstairs. Grandpa, with his oversized underwear and chicken legs, jumped out of bed and grabbed a long pipe that was by his bedside, ready to march downstairs and defend his family. Leena, Sally, and Nana begged him not to go, pulling on his undershirt to hold him back. Davey jumped out of bed, grabbed a curtain rod, and urged Grandpa onward. They went downstairs, Sally still crying and calling us little bastards for bringing those gangsters over here to kill us all. I thought for sure I'd never see Grandpa or Davey ever again, but after a few minutes we heard friendly voices talking in the kitchen, and the sound of Nana boiling tea and setting the table. When we went downstairs we saw Joe Malone, a friend of the family's from Ireland, nursing a bloody wound on his head with a towel soaked in hot water, and telling Grandpa and Davey about the terrible car accident he'd been in, that he'd been out drinking and hit a damn construction truck

that was parked in front of him on his way home. Instead of going to a hospital, he'd come to be taken care of at Nana's. They all laughed at what a good thing it was that Grandpa had recognized him through all the blood on his face. "He'd have had the head knocked off of him otherwise," Davey said.

We went back to Old Colony in the morning, and found Coley asleep at the windowsill with the shotgun as his pillow. When we said his name, he was startled and pretended he'd been awake all along. He aimed out the window with one eye closed still awaiting a gunfight with Freddy Callaghan, muttering in his Connemara Gaelic what sounded like fighting words.

From here on in, the whole neighborhood was friendly to us. Being the youngest in a family with a rep for being crazy, I'd never have to fight again in Old Colony, or in any of the areas immediately surrounding the project.

One day not long after we moved there, my friend Danny and I left Old Colony to walk Southie's main streets. Our first challenge was not to pass through anyone else's territories in the Lower End, which I'd quickly learned was the more run-down section of South Boston, with its three huge housing projects—Old Colony, D Street, and Old Harbor—and mazes of three-deckers lining alleyways and small lanes watched over by mothers in lawn chairs and tough-looking teenagers milling about on the corners. When I looked down the side streets of connected houses and concrete, I saw more groups of teenagers and kids hanging out in front of corner stores, keeping guard, popping up their heads to inspect us and to make sure that we knew better than to come down their street.

At the top of Dorchester Street we came to Broadway, grocery stores, toy stores, donut shops, liquor stores, and barrooms crowding every block. Danny told me that if we walked up the hill to the right we'd be on East Broadway, heading toward City Point and the rich people in Southie, and that if we went left we'd be going down West Broadway where things were a little more normal. He said we'd be

better off sticking to West Broadway, which passed through the Lower End.

We saw people we knew from Old Colony strolling down West Broadway, a parade mostly of young women with baby carriages. I started to notice that Southie people had a similar look about their faces. There was a toughness to everything but the eyes. Everyone had those humorous sparkly eyes that I knew were Irish, having seen them in Jamaica Plain and at the Irish Field Day in Dedham and in the countenances of my own relatives. But these Irish eyes were set in faces that looked as if they'd spent much of their time defying whatever shit had come their way. It was a proud look, though, and only the eyes betrayed the hearts behind the hard-as-a-rock faces they'd learned to project. When folks from Southie smiled or laughed, they looked like completely different people. Groups of teenagers from different territories of the Lower End passed each other without saying a word. They were on neutral ground on West Broadway. There was also what Danny called "the wall," a long red-brick partition alongside Southie Savings Bank, lined with dozing winos who sometimes stirred to fight each other. The wall was the perfect place to watch the coming and going on Broadway, but few people ever wanted to sit there, for fear of being seen with the winos.

A young balding man with an unsteady head made a beeline for us with his hand stretched out. He didn't look at me directly; his head was wobbling too much. He peered at me out of the corners of his eyes and asked, "Gotta quarter?" I dodged him, ducking under his hand, and he spun around repeating, "Gotta quarter?" and chasing after me. When he spotted someone else in his path, he immediately switched to them for a donation. Danny caught up with me laughing, and told me I'd met "Bobby Got-a-Quarter." Everyone in Southie knew Bobby and was used to him. While most adults automatically paid the obligatory toll, the kids walking down Broadway played with him. They knew he especially liked girls, so they would send him after one of the young girls with his hand

stretched out. But he was part of the neighborhood, and I noticed that no one really bothered him.

At the bottom of West Broadway was D Street Project. Danny said we could only walk around the border of it, because we were from Old Colony, and the kids in D Street wouldn't allow us even to pass through. I was curious then, and wanted to see what the people looked like and if D Street was anything like Old Colony. A few people came walking out of D Street and Danny pointed out to me that they were dirtier than Old Colony people, that's why they were called "D Street dirtballs." People in Old Colony usually sported designer labels—sometimes stolen, as I'd learned, off the backs of trucks or from the department stores in town. But the D Street kids looked hopeless. Danny told me that the people who ended up in D Street were "white niggers." I'd never heard the term before; and I ran it around in my head over and over again, trying to picture what it might mean, and wondering whether white niggers were friendly with the black niggers over in Columbia Point, where we were also never to cross through.

I didn't hear the term "white nigger" again until I passed through City Point and found out that I was one myself. City Point was on the other end of Southie from us, with houses that usually had some distance from each other—if only about five feet—and where most kids had a father. What looked rich to us actually meant working class. The fathers mostly had jobs with the city or the Mass Bay Transit Authority, or in construction. One day Danny tried to take me to see Castle Island, a peninsula that juts out from the South Boston neighborhood, and that has a colonial fort that looks like a castle. To get to Castle Island we had to pass through "the Heights," or Dorchester Heights, where a sign said something about George Washington taking control of the hill and forcing the British to evacuate Boston. I was more impressed by all the trees, and the nicely painted houses that lined the streets leading to the bay. Further along, in "the Point," I noticed the people looked different. They still had the Irish faces, and many had a tough look. But they

wore turtlenecks and chino pants, pressed and cuffed just right. Some had Irish knit sweaters, but these were draped over their shoulders the way rich people did. They also wore lots of green, I guess to prove that they were still Irish. I found out in City Point that we were "project rats" and "white niggers." The Point kids chased us back down the hills to the Lower End, "where you belong!" they yelled from the Heights, standing ground at the invisible line they too didn't dare cross.

I spent hours in our apartment in Old Colony trying to grasp this hierarchy of niggers that I'd discovered. I wanted to know exactly where I fit into the scheme. Of course, no one considered himself a nigger. It was always something you called someone who could be considered anything less than you. I soon found out that there were a few black families living in Old Colony. They'd lived there for years and everyone said that they were okay, that they weren't niggers but just black. It felt good to all of us to not be as bad as the hopeless people in D Street or, God forbid, the ones in Columbia Point, who were both black and niggers. But now I was jealous of the kids in Old Harbor Project down the road, which seemed like a step up from Old Colony, having many families left over from when housing projects were for war veterans, and where some of the kids had fathers. Of course, we were all niggers if we went to City Point, so forget going there again to see the beautiful beaches and Castle Island. I wondered if the Point kids might be niggers to people who'd really made it, like out in tidy West Roxbury or the suburbs that everyone talked about moving to when they won the lottery.

In Old Colony, we had all the right gear, but we didn't match as well as the Point kids. We weren't able to get *everything* in green; we had to take what we could get from Skoochie. She was the local klepto, who went into town daily to steal what she could from Filene's and Jordan Marsh. She went door-to-door in the project, with huge shopping bags filled with designer labels. I thought Skoochie looked important, earning a hard living for her kids and never taking a day

of rest. She walked more proud and straight-shouldered than the other young mothers, and was always dressed to kill: tight Gloria Vanderbilt jeans tucked into spike boots and a red leather jacket with a fur collar. But she had the face of a rat. She became friendly with Ma, and started to come by weekly, as we had so many kids to clothe. She'd lay everything out on the couches and tables, and show the Ralph Lauren label and the attached price tag. The standard price for hot goods was always one-third the ticket price, but my mother usually got her down to about one-fourth. Skoochie sold us everything, from sneakers to fur coats for my sisters. Joe and Frankie would light up when they saw the leather coats she had. Kevin got excited too, calling the brown leather coats with the wide pointy collars "pimpin'."

People in Southie had a unique "Southie look" that crossed all turf lines, the only difference being that the kids "up the Point" were a little more polished, and the kids in D Street were just plain dirty, their clothes not as new. In the summer, we rolled up our bell-bottoms to about midcalf, and flipped our collars up. Hospital pants and shirts were popular—and sometimes a surgical mask around the neck!—and everyone had a "Southie cut," the trademark hairstyle that proved you were from the neighborhood. I had to get a Southie cut once I noticed everyone had something to say about the bushy mess of curls I'd inherited from Nana's people in the hills of Donegal. The Southie cut consisted of hair severely parted down the middle in a perfectly straight line, cut very short, and blow-dried back to form wings. People walked with a stiff neck to keep all their hairs in place. The toughest guys in Southie looked as if they'd spent hours getting their hair just right for a day of milling about on the corner.

All the boys had homemade tattoos, done with a sewing needle and green ink. Some had a shamrock outline and "Irish Power" on their arm. On some afternoons you'd see teenagers sitting on curbs tattooing a cross onto each other's middle fingers, and a dot onto

their wrists. The "Southie dot" identified you as okay within the neighborhood but would get you into trouble if you ever ventured into downtown Boston, where everyone said there were loads of blacks looking for fights, and liberals who branded Southie kids as thieves, punks, or racists. Most people in my neighborhood didn't have any reason to go downtown anyway, except to steal bikes from college students or to shoplift, none of which ever was to be done within the neighborhood. Those were the rules. And if you ever ended up in jail, your Southie dot would make you a target among the black inmates. But everyone went ahead and did the Southie dot anyway, to prove their loyalty to the neighborhood, regardless of the consequences in the outside world.

If South Boston was its own world, Old Colony was a world within a world. Aside from the strolls up Broadway, we mostly spent our entire day in the project, especially in the summer when school was out. There was plenty of excitement. Every stoop had its own group of mothers and babies sitting all day, next to wading pools and a hose that spilled water onto the sidewalk and into the gutter. The water in the gutter was called polio water, because it stank so bad from mixing with mud and garbage, and if you ever stepped into it you were branded for a whole day as the one with polio on your sneaker. Skoochie and a few other shoplifters went door-to-door, with people excitedly calling them from windowsills to come up and show them the hot goods. Dizzo came down our street with his ice cream truck about five times a day, blasting the warbling recorded melody to "Three Blind Mice." Dizzo knew everyone in the neighborhood and got out of his truck to share all the latest news with the women up in their windows or on the stoops, while kids poured out of the woodwork to buy their third or fourth ice cream for the day. If the little kids couldn't get the ice cream money from their mothers, there was always some neighbor who had an extra quarter, and Dizzo was known to give a free ice cream if you looked really desperate or put on a "left out" face at the truck's window.

Like us, most of the kids in Old Colony had no set time to go into their apartment to eat. So around what would have been suppertime, someone would pull out the illegal firemen's wrench and open a hydrant, spilling more water into the gutter, making floods of polio water at the bottom of the street. The news traveled all over the project in minutes, with kids calling up to their friends' windows that the hydrant was open. We lined up at the mouth of the hydrant to jump into the blast of water and were pushed across the pavement on our backs all the way to the other side of the street. If we touched the polio lakes forming on the downslopes of the pavement, we could wash it right off with the rush of hydrant water. When cars came down the street, we all stopped what we were doing and played innocent. There'd be some stop and go, as the driver inched toward the water stream and we pretended to be ready to blast him. When the driver felt it was safe and that we were just faking, that's when one of us would put two hands at the bottom of the gush of water, sending a spray through the windows of the car. Usually the driver would get out and chase us, unless he wasn't from the neighborhood, in which case he'd rather speed off than get into trouble in Old Colony. Most people from the neighborhood knew better, and simply kept their windows closed, getting a free car wash. Unlike outsiders, they thought nothing of showing us kids that they didn't trust us, rolling up all windows before going forward.

The hydrant provided about a half hour of entertainment until the cops came to chase everyone away and to shut the hydrant off. Usually someone's mother would yell from the window to warn us that the cops were coming. Everyone ran in all directions. When the coast was clear, after there'd been about two minutes of silence on the street and the police officers had paced in circles around the hydrant to make their presence known, everyone came running out again, one kid carrying the firemen's wrench to turn the hydrant back on. This went on for hours, between the cops chasing us away and shutting off the hydrant, and us turning it back on again. If they

ever got hold of the wrench we used, that would be the end of it all, until we found someone else with connections at the fire department to steal a wrench.

There was always something to do in Old Colony, and it seemed a much bigger place than the six or so blocks it actually was. In fact, it seemed bigger than the whole outside world, bigger than Broadway, the beach, downtown, and Jamaica Plain all put together. When you walked into the maze of red bricks and tunnels after being on the outside, it was like walking into another world. We had our own beaches—plastic wading pools and lawn chairs on the cement in front of the buildings. And we had our own friendships and fights. At the edge of the project, Old Colony even had its own corner stores that would cash welfare checks, and liquor stores for anyone who needed a drink. The liquor stores even delivered to some of the older people who didn't come out of their houses much. We had a church on the corner that would fill on Sundays, mostly with second graders preparing for First Communion and elderly women. Carson Beach was right down the street, but most people didn't bother with that. Many of the teenagers and young women lay their beach chairs out on the roofs of the project, and you could smell the tanning oil and hear groups like Earth, Wind, and Fire blasting from radios all tuned to the same station. Old Colony was all ours, and we never wanted to leave.

The kids in the neighborhood created every bit of fun that we had. Mothers never had to find something for us to do. Sometimes we'd get bored, but that's when we'd go up to the rooftops and throw splashes of pebbles down onto the heads of outsiders passing by the outskirts of the project. We'd duck then, and they wouldn't dare come after us, unless a car window broke and we'd have to run before the cops came.

On summer nights, after the hydrants were abandoned, it was time to set the dumpsters on fire. We knew that this would bring the big red fire trucks out from Engine 6. As the trucks came roaring

down Patterson Way, sirens and lights and all, you could feel the excitement like electricity. Kids appeared from hallways and tunnels, chasing after the fire trucks. The firemen clambered out to extinguish the dumpster fire, with flames that reached as high as the second-floor windows, while we climbed on top of their trucks, hanging from the ladders and ringing the bells.

There was usually one fireman still left to mind the truck, and he'd help us up and place us in the rear ladder seat that had a steering wheel of its own. Engine 6 had gotten used to us. It seemed they were in on our fun. I figured they'd be bored to tears if it weren't for us kids inviting them into our private world. Many a time the firemen actually stayed on Patterson Way a good half hour after putting out the dumpster, talking to us kids and answering our questions about being a fireman. We didn't know too many guys with jobs, let alone a fun job with all the effects: the lights, the sirens, the fire, and gushers of water. We even liked the black firemen, who must have been aware of their unusual status in being welcomed into Old Colony. They were the most friendly to us, and always seemed happy to see us. We got to know most of the firemen, and we knew we'd see them again soon, same time, same place, unless there was a real fire going on somewhere else.

The teenagers in the neighborhood made their own fun too. The firemen thought they were punks, though. Sometimes the older kids brought Engine 6 down Patterson Way by tying someone they didn't like to the firebox in his underwear and pulling the alarm. This was occasionally a lesson to outsiders not to hang out in Old Colony. The firemen would come out and untie the poor captive from the firebox, but afterward they usually weren't in the same mood as when the little kids brought them out with an innocent dumpster fire.

By about ten o'clock we'd all go into our apartments, and on the hottest nights we wondered what fights would break out that we could watch from our windowsills. Ma always said that the heat brought out the craziness in the neighborhood, just like it brought

out the craziness in the hordes of cockroaches that would take over our kitchen in the middle of the night. Mothers hung out on stoops gossiping and chain-smoking and watching every move on the street. If a car came down Patterson Way, everyone would stop talking to watch the car drive past. It seemed as if we were all hoping for some action, all the time.

Groups of teenagers would gather around the same spot in the middle of the street, leaning against parked cars on both sides of Patterson Way. They usually told war stories of fights they'd been in, or had seen. They gave blow-by-blow reenactments, throwing heroic punches and kicks, and acting out in slow motion how the victim reacted to the blows. They would stop what they were doing to talk to someone in a car that pulled up, popping their whole upper body through the open window for a few seconds. Then they'd pop out again, and the car would speed off. Other times a local would walk up to them and be escorted into a dark hallway, again for just a few seconds. Then they would be off in a flash as well. I knew the teenagers were selling pot but I never said a word about it, just kept my mouth shut. In Southie the worst thing you could be was a snitch. Those were the rules. Kevin was only eleven, but he sat by the teenagers who were running the show, and it wasn't long at all before he became the one popping his upper body into a car window or taking someone's mother into a dark hallway.

One night as I sat in the window watching and waiting for something to explode, I saw a giant cockroach appear out of the corner of my eye. I thought it was a rat it was so big, and I completely forgot about the tension building outside on one of the hottest nights of the year. It was about four inches long and more than an inch thick. I'd never before seen a cockroach the size of that one, and I yelled as loud as I could. The mothers all looked up from the stoop, Kevin and his friends in the street barreled upstairs, and my mother and sisters came out of their rooms. This was great, I thought. My whole family and a good portion of the neighborhood were sticking together to gang up on the giant cockroach. Kevin laughed when he

saw what it was, but he led everyone else on a chase through the house after it. The mothers didn't budge from the stoop, but they wanted to know what was going on and waited for updates from our window. Just when Kevin had cornered the roach, and it knew its moments were numbered, it suddenly discovered it had a means of escape. It spread its huge wings and attempted to fly, but could only make long leaps. You could hear it landing with a small thump from wall to ceiling. We threw shoes and it finally leapt into the bathtub and down the drain. Ma turned on the water, as the gang of neighborhood kids looked on, crowded into our small bathroom. One of the teenagers said it was a "water bug" brand of cockroach and that we'd see plenty more of them this summer, especially on muggy nights. "Did you fuckin' kill it yet or what?" one of the mothers yelled up with a laugh. We weren't sure, so I kept the water running down the drain all night. The episode had broken that night's tension on Patterson Way. It was good to be part of the neighborhood.

On some days I sat for hours in the window, watching the comings and goings on Patterson Way. In no time at all my own family had become part of the moving picture of the street.

There was Joe with his head in the engine of someone's car, with a line of neighbors ready to barter with him. Joe was the neighborhood mechanic, always out front fixing cars for everyone in the project, and he could fix anything for less than they would charge at the garages. Sometimes customers would offer him a "nickel bag" of pot if they didn't have the cash.

Across the street I'd see Kathy, all dolled up in her bellbottoms and tube top, one of the best-looking girls in the neighborhood, smoking her cigarettes with some of the tougher twelve-year-olds. She was known to be able to beat up any boy her age, even the roughnecks she dated.

Frankie would come and go. He'd stop to hang out with Joe under the hood of a car before heading off to the local gym to box. He

never sat still for long, though. He worked out constantly, boxing, running, or lifting weights in the house.

Then there was Kevin; he'd follow Frankie off to go running or to work out. He was good at almost any sport, but he was always pulled back to the distractions of the street, the wheeling and dealing on Patterson Way. The neighborhood started calling him "Mini Mac" because he was so much smaller than the rest of us.

Even Davey, on his weekend visits home from Mass Mental, had become a character in the brick landscape. He paced up and down the street, with a peculiar high bounce to every step. Some would imitate his bouncy walk, but no one bothered him. Little kids in the neighborhood would call him over to do his famous imitations of the Burger King from the commercials. He'd break away from his intense thinking and walk over to them with a smile. After he did his imitations, back he'd go into his own world, pacing up and down Patterson Way.

Mary's new boyfriend, who we called Jimmy the Greek, would come down the street to pick her up in his long white Lincoln Continental. We'd all stop what we were doing when we heard his horn blast a trumpet charge to announce his arrival. The teenagers all admired his "pimpin' wheels." "What in the hell kind of a horn is that?" Ma would say. Mary said it was a Greek horn. Ma didn't like Jimmy and she just called him "the Greek." She thought he was too old for Mary, since she was sixteen and he was twenty-three. But Mary'd rather date an outsider than the limited pool of project guys who were usually at the center of girl fights.

I noticed that even our new dog, Sarge, having faced his own initiations, now roamed Old Colony forming his own alliances with certain packs of dogs. He'd go to the door to be let out for the day, and in the streets he'd only acknowledge you briefly, as if appearing too attached to us, his family, might make him less of a dog's dog.

Ma was part of the picture outside too, but only momentarily, clacking by in her spike heels and talking to everyone in their win-

dows on her way up to Broadway for a day of grocery shopping and telling stories in the coffee shops. Ma never sat on the stoops, though; she was too worried about her figure. She couldn't get over the amount of sitting the mothers did. "And they're still in their nightgowns no less," she said. "By Christ, that's how they get the wide and flat-as-a-pancake asses." Ma didn't want one of them.

I was in the second grade at the John Boyle O'Reilly public school. When I came home from school every day, there was Coley sitting on the floor watching cartoons. I'd join him. You couldn't distract him when he was watching cartoons. He wouldn't hear a word you said. He'd just laugh away, and wait with anticipation for Bugs Bunny's next move. Sometimes he'd duck his head, or throw a punch at the air, according to whatever was going on in the story. We all liked Coley. He was Ma's best boyfriend. He'd gone sober in those days, and he was always keeping us laughing. Being from Connemara in Ireland, his first language was Gaelic. And he sat there chewing on seaweed while he watched TV. He said they all ate it where he came from. He fixed the house up, building new cabinets, shelves, and even a wooden-box couch that I thought looked like a coffin. He cooked dinner every night for us, before watching his other favorite program, boxing. He was a boxer himself, and he'd throw blocks and punches while he watched the matches too. He actually thought he was in the ring, and you couldn't break his concentration. He never tried to act like he was our father, and he never told us what to do. He was like one of the kids, and I think he knew Ma was the boss.

The second grade was when I started to lie about where I lived. The kids at the O'Reilly were mostly from the housing projects, but we all said we lived in a house. The funny thing was that we all knew who was lying. Sometimes we'd accuse each other of being on welfare and eating "wellie cheese." And we'd tell jokes about each other, about what someone couldn't afford, the "You're so poor"

jokes. "You're so poor you can't afford to wipe your ass!" Whatever that meant. Then there were the "Your mother's so poor" jokes, which were always enough to start a brawl.

Ma used to give me a dollar food stamp to buy candy on the way home. I'd stop by the store extra early in the morning to buy something for a nickel so that I'd have the ninety-five cents to show on the way home, when I was with the other kids from school. I didn't want to pull out the food stamp in front of them, even though I'd seen their own mothers shopping with food stamps. Ma was generous with money and sometimes she'd give me two or three dollars in food stamps. But then I'd have to go to two or three stores to buy something for a nickel at each and collect the change. The stores were nice enough about letting kids buy candy or gum, which I don't think was actually allowed by the government. I didn't want to push it, though, by changing three different food stamps in one visit to the same store. Kathy and Kevin would sell theirs on the street for a little less than they were worth, so they could buy some smokes, which was definitely not allowed with food stamps. And one time I brought food stamps to the movie theater on Broadway. I thought no one would see me with them when I tried to buy popcorn, but the popcorn lady got everyone in the lobby laughing as she told the story to whoever came by the counter. "That's the best one yet," she howled. "These people think they can use food stamps for anything they want!" I had to hide from her the rest of the night. A few days later I saw her using food stamps herself at the supermarket, and she got a pack of cigarettes with them.

We all were on food stamps, but most of the jokes around town were about black people on welfare. The same thing with living in the projects and eating wellie cheese—those were black things. So was shoplifting and selling hot goods, although we justified that as long as we didn't steal from businesses within the neighborhood, or from other neighborhood folks. One time when a Southie kid stole another Southie kid's bike, it was called "niggerish." He should've

gone into town to get one from a rich college student if he was going to do it at all. But he was new to the neighborhood and hadn't learned the rules yet.

The Boston Housing Authority came through the apartment on a regular basis, to make sure the house was kept up. The house was looking great since Coley had moved in with us, building furniture and cleaning rugs. But whenever the inspectors were coming over with their pens and notebooks, Ma had to get rid of Coley for the day. Our apartment passed inspections, but the project itself wasn't looking too good. The ancient mailboxes in the hallway were falling apart. Everyone had to greet the mailman on welfare check day, so as not to risk having it stolen from a flimsy mailbox. The trash incinerators had the steel shutters broken off, with open flames coming out of the stack. You had to throw your trash from a distance in order to avoid being set on fire. The front doors to the buildings were hanging off their hinges. And when a hallway window broke, it would stay broken through the winter.

Long after the BHA inspectors were gone, when it got dark, the roaches would come out in droves. They didn't like the light, so if you ever got up in the middle of the night, you'd see them scatter all over the place as soon as you flicked the switch. They'd be covering the kitchen floor, carrying food and hovering around the slightest drop of liquid. They loved tonic, especially Sprite. I'd figured this out one morning after I'd left half a glass of Sprite out overnight and had woken up to find about twenty dead cockroaches floating around in the cup. That's when I realized that they had wings too, just like the huge water bug roaches that came out in the summer. But they never used them until they started to drown in the Sprite. They all floated in the cup with their useless wings spread out. I stared at them for a good long time, wondering if they didn't know how to use their wings, or if they just didn't know they had them, until it was too late to save themselves.

We were keeping the house as clean as we could, and the roaches were still taking over. So at night I started to leave all the lights on so I wouldn't have to deal with them if I woke up to go to the bathroom. I also put glasses of Sprite in all the corners of the house, to kill as many as I could. I'd count them in the morning, and one night I got about a hundred. It became fun. We weren't the only ones with the problem. I started to notice that most of the other apartments in Old Colony were also lit up all night long. What did we care. We weren't paying electric bills—that came with the rent. We weren't paying heat bills either, and the project didn't mind blasting the heat into our apartments nine months out of the year. Most people in Old Colony had to leave their windows open all winter long. You couldn't really control the levels on any of the radiators, and the heat would kill you if you ever closed the windows.

I was always shocked to go to my cousins' house in the suburbs, where they'd shut off any light that wasn't being used and turn the heat way down at night. I was used to project heat and would freeze if I ever slept anywhere else. *There's no place like Old Colony,* I thought. All the rules we were learning didn't make any sense anywhere else. Not the rules about heat and light, not the rules about what to wear, not the rules about money. In the suburbs the kids were wearing cheap Wrangler corduroys and scruffy sneakers. Our designer clothes had to be spotless so that no one would call us "project rats" or accuse us of being on welfare. There'd been a few times when Ma had brought home sneakers that cost $1.49 at Kmart, thinking we'd wear them—but no way! Everyone in the neighborhood called the cheap sneakers "bobos." We made Ma get the very best from Skoochie's shopping bag of designer goods. She was always generous with whatever money she had. When we'd go to the store with our cousins, we'd ask Ma for a few dollars, whether in food stamps or real money. She'd give me a fiver sometimes. My cousins would each get about a quarter from their mother and father. *And they're the rich ones living in the suburbs with a father and all,* I thought.

* * *

Even though Ma would give us whatever money we wanted, I started to get in on some of the scams local kids would come up with. It wasn't big stuff. We didn't get a lot of money; it was more for something to do. I'd go out to the main intersection outside the project, along with Kevin and my friend Danny, to hit up the commuters going back to the suburbs from their jobs in downtown. We took a tin can from the trash, covered the sides with white lined paper from a notebook, and wrote SOUTH BOSTON YOUTH HOCKEY on it. On the top of the can was a plastic lid with a slit cut into it for dropping money in. We'd approach the drivers, and I couldn't believe how nearly all of them would give us money while they were stopped at the red light.

During rush hour, we'd make about ten bucks each. We started doing it every day, and the only time we were chased away was by one of the drivers who was a local from City Point, who said that he was a coach for South Boston Youth Hockey himself and had never seen us before in his life. Kevin told him we had to save up to buy the hockey sticks and pads and helmets before we could join, and he got out of his car and said he'd better not see us out there again. That's when we changed our labels to OLD COLONY BASKETBALL. Kids in the project were more likely to play basketball anyway. It was cheap; all you needed was a ball and a hoop. No one at the intersection would know if we were really in a league or not, and certainly no one in Old Colony would care to investigate it. In Old Colony we stuck together.

It was on one of those days at the intersection in the spring of 1974 that we saw the headlights blinking and heard the honking and loudspeakers screaming something about the communists trying to take over South Boston. Everyone came running out of the project to line the streets. At first it was scary, like the end of the world was being announced. But then it seemed more like a parade. It was even

along the same route as the St. Paddy's Day parade. One neighbor said it was what they called a motorcade. The cars in the motorcade never seemed to stop coming. It went on for a good half hour. Irish flags waved out of car windows and one sign on a car read WELCOME TO MOSCOW AMERICA. Many more had RESIST or NEVER written on them. My favorite one was HELL NO SOUTHIE WON'T GO. That was a good one, I said. I started clapping with everyone else. But then I had to ask someone, "Where are we not going?" One of the mothers said, "They're trying to send you to Roxbury with the niggers. To get a beatin'," she added. Someone else told her not to say that word to the kids, that they were blacks, not niggers. "Well it's no time to fight over that one," someone else said. "It's time now to stick together." When I asked who was trying to send us, someone told me about Judge Garrity; that a bunch of rich people from the suburbs wanted to tell us where we had to send our kids to school; that they wanted us to mix with the blacks, but that their own kids wouldn't have to mix with no one, because there were no blacks in the suburbs.

Everyone waved to Dapper O'Neil when he rode by in the motorcade. They loved him. But they got really excited when they saw Louise Day Hicks, their favorite committee woman. I'd never heard of her before. She looked nice enough, though, like someone's grandmother, a tubby older woman with a flowery old-fashioned dress like Nana wore and a small church hat perched on top of her round Irish face. People said she was from Southie, but she didn't have a face that looked like she'd been through much. Her father was a judge and she lived in a big beachfront house in City Point, but she was okay with us. "She's the only one sticking up for us," someone said. So I liked her too. Someone on a bullhorn started shouting about the rights of the people, and about not letting the government force this and force that on us. I knew he was right, and I felt myself getting angry along with him. And I also knew that these adults were going to put up a fight for *me*. God, we couldn't

have been living in a better neighborhood! *Everyone's sticking together,* I thought. *Everyone's going to fight for us kids.* We all cheered as the motorcade made its way toward City Point.

When the motorcade had passed, everyone lingered on street corners in the project talking about "forced busing." It was going to begin in the fall, they said. They all seemed to know it was going to happen, but win or lose, everyone believed in going down fighting. I saw neighbors talking, people I knew had grudges against each other before. In the following days, I even saw people who were from different parts of Southie getting over their differences to talk about the busing. Mothers from City Point talking on Broadway to mothers from the projects. I couldn't believe it. The whole feeling in the neighborhood was changing. Before long, we kids could cross any turf line. We were united. Some said it was the communists who were making this happen. Still others said it was rich lawyers, judges, and politicians from the suburbs, and that it had nothing to do with the blacks, that they didn't want to come to Southie any more than we wanted to go to Roxbury. In the end it didn't really matter who we were united against, as long as we kept up our Southie loyalty.

Some of the neighbors raged against "the niggers" more than ever before. But others were starting to talk about how this wasn't about race. That it was about poor people being told that they have to do things that rich people don't have to do. Our mothers couldn't get over people thinking that we had something in our schools that blacks in Roxbury didn't have. "Our kids have just as little," they said. "Neither side has a pot to piss in and now they want us to fight over who can piss in what alley." I couldn't believe that there were people who were now willing to admit they were poor. I'd never heard that one before in Southie, especially not in the project. We weren't poor; that was a black thing, being poor. But the ones who talked about us being poor were few and far between, and it wasn't long before the talk became all "niggers this" and "niggers that."

Toward the end of the school year, we could feel that our lives were about to change. Like most of the mothers in Old Colony and in South Boston, Ma was trying to get us out of the public schools so we wouldn't have to be bused. The first year of busing, Phase One, would only include kids at the high school levels, matching up Roxbury with South Boston. Then the next year, Phase Two, would bring busing to the whole city. But parents were in a race to get their kids into Catholic schools before the seats filled up. The teachers at the John Boyle O'Reilly were talking to each other about how strange it was that the officials had picked the poorest all-black neighborhood and the poorest all-white neighborhood for "their social experiment." Even the second graders at the O'Reilly talked about getting ready for the bloodbath. Ma got us into St. Augustine's School down the road. The priests were letting people pay according to their incomes, and some of the poorer mothers would now have to work St. Augustine's bingo nights for their cheap tuition. I'd been getting to like the O'Reilly School, but I was glad that I'd be able to stay in the neighborhood, away from the bloodbath.

One day that June, we had to stay in our classroom a couple of hours extra. It was getting warm outside and we all wanted to go home and play and get ready for the motorcades, which had become a weekly protest in the neighborhood. But we weren't allowed to leave. We saw the police and state troopers starting to assemble on the streets outside. The teachers told us that they were afraid there would be riots today and that we couldn't go home until it was safe. Racial fights were breaking out around the city after a white woman had been covered in gasoline and set on fire in Roxbury. A police officer came to all of the homerooms to make it clear that we weren't allowed to leave the school. I was scared and just wanted to be with my family. After a while they let us go, and when I got back to Old Colony, with the police cruisers still speeding up and down streets, all the talk in the neighborhood was about the coming race war.

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Along with the craziness and the cockroaches, the summer of 1974 brought with it great anticipation for the fight of our lives. Motorcades and marches became arenas for our daily play. We still set dumpster fires, and a couple times we were able to light up a stolen car, stripped and abandoned in Old Colony, before the BHA finally removed it. But organized protests brought more thrills than anything we'd ever known. Most of the marches and rallies were peaceful, though the threat of violence filled the air. You could hear it in the throats of politicians like Ray Flynn and Dapper O'Neil, who led the cheering crowds. And you could see it in the watery swelled-up eyes of mothers, not sure whether they would cry or lash out. I knew these women were doing everything in their power to do neither, to hide their pain. But what mattered most was seeing how much they cared about us kids, and to tell the truth I wouldn't have minded if they'd brought out the Molotov cocktails from the beginning.

My whole family kept up with the wheres and whens of the motorcades and rallies. In Southie, news spread best through word of mouth—besides we didn't want the other side to sabotage our plans by knowing them ahead of time. Ma started to volunteer for Jimmy Kelly and his South Boston Information Center, which controlled much of the information in the neighborhood. Southie couldn't rely on what Jimmy Kelly called "the liberal media establishment," and whatever that meant I knew I too wanted nothing to do with it. It was us against them, and my family was now part of the "us," as the neighborhood closed off more and more to the outside world.

CHAPTER 4

FIGHT THE POWER

'Twas on a dreary Thursday morn'
As the buses rolled along.
They came up to our peaceful town
With orders from The Law:
Desegregate and integrate
Or you will pay the price
Of loss of pride, humility,
And even your children's lives.

But Southie's spirit was so strong,
They made us a barrack town.
They took their horses, dogs, and guns
and set them on the crowd.
The TPF, their sticks did crack
On the young and old alike.
But united still, our spirits high,
We'll fight for freedom's right.

—HELEN KING