

## **Jimmy and Me**

I was “in.” Jimmy had invited me for pizza and bottles of red at Salernos. Damn flattering for a new guy, even though by that point we’d been working together for two months.

Few training officers said shit to me during the academy, Jimmy included. “Cultural Diversity” was his module, which opened my eyes to a lot of things. So it was serious damn luck my then being assigned to Jimmy’s station. We’re right where the West Side, which is nearly all black, becomes the near Northwest Side, which can be nearly all Hispanic, especially around Humboldt Park where Sacramento Boulevard runs into North Avenue with all the taquerias selling tripe and tongue. I’d never heard of such kind of food. In that cadet class, Jimmy explained how we could see Dude on the street and think Dude was black when Dude actually was Puerto Rican and might not comprehend all our questions and directives. For that extra duty pay—double-time, Jimmy had to say all this to my cadets group but didn’t fraternize with us during breaks. Just pulled out his cellphone and leaned against the wall quietly talking.

Yet there we were at one A.M. around that back table facing the front door at Salernos about twenty blocks beyond our precinct. This followed my first double-shift—Jimmy, me, and three other guys, all vets and no rookies, whose wives or girlfriends were asleep, or like me, were newly single and hated their empty condo or bungalow right after work. It’s depressing to be alone immediately after upholding order and peace in the streets for sixteen hours. Gotta

celebrate with another law-abiding human being, or, at least with us at Salernos, do some face-time with comrades and relish the fact that you're looking at each other and speaking to each other under *normal* circumstances. My fiancé had just moved out and I was avoiding my rented brownstone walking distance from Oak Street Beach. We'd met when I too made sweet coin, before I'd even applied to be a cop, one of the city's harder jobs to land, even for someone like me with two college degrees. Application to final interview with a CPD lieutenant took thirteen months. "Hey man, we the only brothers from the hood drinkin' wine anywhere," Jimmy laughed that first night at Salernos, even though I'm not from the hood.

Guys came and went at Salernos, but Jimmy and me were there every other week after our eight A.M. to midnight. Jimmy did our beat eleven years after growing up in our actual precinct but then not getting through Loyola. He said organic chemistry was eating his lunch *and* dinner when he realized he already had enough college hours for CPD. But his ease with the wheel and knowing when to leave the car and when to stay in, when to radio for coverage, and when to "slam a nigger" to the pavement so you avoided neutralizing someone, told me that I needed to study this guy like our young corrupt alderman study Mayor Daley. My study was for a legit cause though. Serious further damn luck my being paired with Jimmy.

This was three years ago, after a fifteen-year detour through law school and lawyering, when my cop idea came back. I'd been a lawyer for six. Growing up in Buffalo Grove way out past O'Hare made this more possible, my passing the bar and making six-figures. And all this is why I'm a cop now. In my third-grade class, my least integrated grade, I was one of two black kids. That's a school pic I have. The others are in my mom's cabinets somewhere. My teacher's or the photographer's awkwardness shows because they spaced me and the other black kid four kids apart right in the middle of the middle row, despite our being taller than everyone else, as if to apologize, prove that they were going out of their way to blend us into the group. I lost contact

with that kid by high school. My father told me it wasn't about who wasn't there, but about who was. And I was there, so that's what mattered. Student life was somewhat diverse in high school, and then fairly diverse during undergrad down in Urbana-Champaign. Far less so at Notre Dame Law where my father's advice was a dual-edged sword. The helpful edge was that his wise words let me handle my business in that old-school, white-ass environment. I was there. I'd made it, and for right then, that's what mattered. My goal was a grad degree in social work with some electives in law and criminal justice and then to join a police force somewhere. I'd be a rare cop who at least partially understood why people were doing the crazy shit they were doing. I could help them stop. But my father, a corporate lawyer at All-State, said that I could do more overall good with a full J.D. I was young. And I believed him. I went all the way through law school. Functioned well because of how I'd been raised. My plan was to practice law only long enough to put away *some* money while figuring out how I could best use my J.D. to assist those who actually needed assistance.

The Chicago firm that took me, a blessing because I did want to come home and help those who looked like me but didn't grow up like me, claimed they were moving to diversify their clients and cases and not just focus on intellectual property law. I was to be part of that evolution, their taking on more civil and criminal cases. Some even pro bono. Again, I believed my elders. Never happened. All we did was defend rich people. Our lakeview downtown office was on the forty-seventh floor. The kind of job Buffalo Grove kids are supposed to get, maybe even some of its few black kids. From the south windows near my desk, I saw the State Street Corridor, with all those ghetto-rise projects that Mayor Daley's mayor father built in the fifties, lining each side of the Dan Ryan. Backed up traffic and even speeding cars can be shooting targets for bored Four Corner Hustlers camped on the project roofs. Now I hear the calls for all that shit on our radios. If I looked long enough, I saw the steel mills in Indiana. Immediately

below, rooftops were little squares and rectangles covering up some of what I read about every morning in the *Sun-Times* on my subway ride. Standing at those windows, I barely believed that such beatings, shootings, stabbings, killings, and rapes went on down there somewhere in that benign brown and gray grid. Splotches of blood red might as well have oozed up from building tops and coated the streets and sidewalks. Many afternoons, I paused from my work to pull the newspaper back out. Usually there were photos, different photos from the paper's website. It seemed egotistical to ignore deaths like these deaths.

I'd been there five-plus years when the two founding partners, both black guys, one of them the guy who'd tickled my ear with the shtick about our taking on more social justice cases, set up a popcorn canister with a slit in its top near our elevator. Taped to the wall was a sign: *Help Our Young Brothers and Young Sisters Better Their Lives*. Brochures with cheery dark-skinned faces, no Caucasian or Asian kids, mind you, grinning for the benefiting social agency, were fanned out on the table around the container. Several times when I walked by without jamming a folded check or big bill into that slit, my coworkers, black and non-black, glanced at me and then the floor or the elevator wall as if I'd just screamed that I never visit my mom on Mother's Day. Very soon the collective weight of everyone else's fives and tens and personal checks along with the quarters and dimes that their children collected and sent with them in sandwich bags anchored the cylinder to the table and the table to the floor. Bump that table and you bruised your leg. Someone duct-taped the lid in place to keep any janitors from stealing. The bosses emptied it every afternoon. This aggravated me—wealthy people, wealthy black people, a decent percentage of us at that firm, "doing our part to give back" to those they pitied for having no prayer of ever having their perfect lives. Fuck, I was one of those wealthy black persons. Did I know any women using W.I.C. cards for diapers and formula? No. Did I ride public transit without wanting to? No. Had I worried about the public schools in my neighborhood when Gina

and I discussed having kids? No. Did all this fortune make me who I was? Yes. My black colleagues' social status, and mine too, I admit, convinced us that we had succeeded. Like we'd proved to White America that not all black people are trash. We can do something besides demand reparations and sell crack and write "bitch and ho" rap songs. Ours was the only black-owned law firm in the city.

Six months after the collection canister went up, on a day with just a cloudy wall outside those floor-to-ceiling windows and nothing visible at street level, the bosses shut everything down on a city holiday when none of us would be in court. We cleared a play area. The charity kids were coming. Partitions and desks and file cabinets lined two sides of our floor and the east windows facing the lake as well as those facing south over the "bad neighborhoods" where many of the kids lived. Coworkers put out homemade cookies. The children gave us handwritten Thank-You notes, folder-sized cards cut from construction paper with marker drawings and inscriptions. At "Go!" we all dashed around on our shag carpet for Tag. After that was Indoor Ultimate Frisbee. I did the first round of games but then peeled away and sat my ass on top of a cleared-off desk. Leaning back on a window, I watched. A white gal from Oregon, a paralegal who went to school here, stood near me and a little girl with cornrows. I could see the woman from the side, her smiling, open mouth taking up her whole face when the little girl turned to both of us with a Nerf ball in her hand. She reared back to throw but tried to stop when she noticed my folded arms in my lap. Airborne by the time my arms were unfolded and my hands up, the ball dropped like a sinkerball and glanced off my left elbow. It bounced right to the Oregonian and off her pointed shoe, rolling to a stop midway between her and the little girl. They both lunged at the ball and then looked up at me right before their hands collided, as if I was the one who supposed to be retrieving the toss. The throw had been for me. The woman scooped the ball off the floor and checked me out again. We were acquainted but not friends.

When I didn't move, she turned to the girl and sang: "Ready? Here it comes!" She swung her arm, ball in hand, back and forth, mobilizing for an underhand toss. Her throw arched file cabinet-high before the girl trapped it against her chest under her chin. The woman's eyes found me again. I stared back until she looked away and ambled off after the girl, already darting toward another adult.

If I said that was what set me off for good, I wouldn't be telling the truest truth. But that sixth year of my six lawyer years was like this over and over. Sure I had compassion for the "disadvantaged in the inner city," but the guilt trips at every charity event hacked me the rest of the way off. What about my colleagues' thirty-five-dollar lunches? And company time spent sifting through websites for timeshares in the Bahamas, and then every afternoon zooming home up the Kennedy in their Jags and BMWs? Bullshit—the rich "giving" to the poor, like anointing Bill Gates the patron saint of generosity while he's living in a \$100 million dollar crib. The hypocrisy worsened at our Christmas dinner and toy drive at the YMCA on Wacker Drive. The final Monday of that year, I wrote the founding partners a resignation letter right after my acceptance letter from CPD arrived. The letterhead read: We Serve and Protect. It's on our squad cars too. I remembered it from '83 or '84 when my dad took me to a Bulls game. Pre-Michael Jordan, tickets were easy. We walked past a squad car there on Madison in front of the old stadium. The words jumped out at me. Shouldn't it have been obvious that police serve us and protect us? That slogan stuck with me from then on every time I heard about Chicago and its issues on the news and in the paper. So much hard evidence substantiating how many people in this city really do need protection and service. That's what I was thinking of, that slogan and all those terrible stories, when I printed out the CPD application.

The older lawyer called me into his office and exhaled when he picked my letter up off his desk. I hadn't given a reason, only that my last day would be the last day of February. "This

just isn't what I'm supposed to be doing," I said when he asked about my quitting. Nowhere in my letter had I explained anything about using up my life to defend people infinitely richer than me. Aiding them to retain the 'fiduciary viability' of their 'intellectual assets' had become too much. It's not ideas that need defending. How about bodies and lives and souls? I'd been waiting for us to defend someone who actually needed defending. Sure my salaries were great but it was too late for me to market myself to a different firm, one that centered itself on criminal law and civil law defense to keep that kind of law honest for everyone. My thirtieth-seventh birthday was coming up. No patience to stall my career change any longer. It was then or never.

So the academy started that summer. Jimmy introduced himself at orientation, paying no more attention to one of us than to the rest of us, strutting around our classroom with a physique ripped enough that I began running the lakefront and doing pushups with my toes on the stone benches where those old sun-wrinkled guys play chess, not counting the reps until my pecs hurt, the way Muhammad Ali conditioned himself—if they don't burn, they don't count. I cut down to one beer a week.

My parents reacted like my coworkers, except that my mom asked tons of questions. My dad only had one, something about me thinking about this new job in terms of "having a family." Most people at the firm were married with kids, and to me, their families made them more self-centered. No one in the world existed except their own husbands and their own wives. No children really mattered, other than those in their house. Not the kids crunching glass bits under their sneakers playing kickball against project breezeway walls or the ones expelled from the Boys Club near the old Henry Horner projects for tripping each other or throwing gang signs during basketball. None of them, the lawyers and founding partner lawyers, or even the middle-class clerks, paralegals, and legal assistants, knew much about "our community." Community should be all of us who deal with what we deal with. It doesn't matter if you have a Ph. D or

dropped out of middle school because what White America sees is just Blackness. That's why we gotta see ourselves as the same. But hardly anyone there did. Those charity drives just let us feel less guilty about having "made it" when so many others hadn't. My friends didn't get it either. During training, their only question was: "Do you like it?" Their American Dream is merely something that you like. If it makes you happy, then it's all-good. "Yeah, I like it," I always said, tempted to articulate the seventeen steps involved in disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling my sidearm Glock or how I lost count of the incisions observed while taking notes at a live autopsy when the doctor rolled the guy's face back up over his forehead to show us what a hollow-point bullet does to a cheekbone. I wanted as well to explain why the barrier in back of squad cars is a plastic shield rather than wire mesh or all the types of bullets my "undershirt" can block. But I never said any of this to any of them because there's no reason to tell people something they already don't give a shit about and don't even know they don't give a shit about. With friends or family now, I imagine I'm still an aloof lawyer and ramble on about whatever is in the news that we all have an opinion on. I don't educate anyone about our strategy at the ABLA Homes to halt foot traffic at peak crack hours. I wish I could just laugh and joke or chat about the Bears or the new tollway or going prices for acre-lots up in Door County, but like one English professor of mine once said, Nothing is at stake. She said that's what any worthwhile story has—something to make you give more than a rat's ass. Whatever pattern my coworkers chose for their new shower tiles or whether they put their kid in French or Latin, everything would be fine.

But things won't be fine no matter what in the neighborhoods that I patrol. Life and death are on the line there twenty-four/seven. That's what Jimmy helped me with. "Don't freeze up," he stated when our radio spit out orders, new places to speed to and intervene. "Just relax so you can do what you gotta do."



The night he died was another of our doubles, both of us working the Visine and gas station coffee. In two hours we should have been inhaling another midnight deep dish sausage, peppers, and basil, and sucking down more California Zin. It was a noise/gang-activity complaint at a park, not a park like the postcard ones along the lakefront that my former colleagues are still gazing down at from their office. Those milk carton-shaped apartments called "two-flats" rimmed every side of this park with a clump of withery birch trees in the middle. We double-parked in front of an El Dorado and a rusting Corvair.

I followed Jimmy between them and over the curb. He nodded at the vehicles, "These two fuckers ain't gettin' away."

The shot, I didn't hear. When highly stressed, my ears go numb like I'm in some giant wind tunnel. It was like that even as a kid playing sports in a game's most intense moments. I see but don't hear. Jimmy and me were twenty yards from them. At least ten of them. No one was doing anything illegal that I saw. Not even any marijuana smell. Late summer but cool and not too humid. Tons of people were out. Those guys were all GDs, Gangster Disciples. Each one, somewhere on their person, donned stripes and sashes of red and black. Red skullcaps for several. Others had the usual black bandannas hanging from back pockets, folded triangular tips swaying around in the breeze. They were grouped up by the playground rocking horses and monkey bars mingled among the few trees. Most turned to us at the same time, as if we were the disruptive ones. We stepped around a wooden bench. There's some famous or infamous battle commander phrase. It blinked on it my head right then: 'Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes.' Or some shit like that. The whites of some of their eyes is what I saw as some part of Jimmy brushed my arm. I remember no sound. I can't describe any gunfire or flash. Only him on the ground. Jimmy's eyes had no whites. Just his lids going up and down. Eyes all irises. Then I

was on my knees touching Jimmy's neck for a pulse. His running blood warmed my hand. It was all in the speaker crevices of my radio too while I called for backup.

"They done got one!" That I did hear. But the yell wasn't as loud as I thought a victory cry would be. Less celebratory than mere declaration of fact. A declaration I heard even though the bullet's discharge into Jimmy was the far louder sound. I expected another shot, that I'd be lying there next to Jimmy, bleeding with him all over that scrubby grass with those thugs mocking us in their pell-mell scam. But no more shots, that I heard. The only sound was Jimmy's clipped exhaling moving the grass blades. He'd rolled onto his side. Air only went out of his mouth. None was going back in.

By law that many people wearing those same colors in the same place can be gang activity. So I too would have called the police if I lived in one of those flats across the street. No normal person wants to look out their front door and see gangbangers. Or that call could have been a gag and we were shooting gallery ducks our first second out of the squad car. Those fleeing thugs were heavy enough, despite all of them being skinny punks, to shake the soil under Jimmy and me. I felt the movement through my bent knees.

Something I also never heard was Jimmy say that he loved or liked this job. All this *He died doing what he loved* is truly bullshit.

I could say something truer than almost everyone who has cycled through the podium four rows in front of me. And I've known Jimmy barely two years. It's all his non-officer friends, and old teachers, and the minister from the church his parents raised him in, and his relatives, who, despite their tears and sobs, are trivializing our loss, even though they don't mean to, like Jimmy actually hasn't died because dying doing what you love isn't dying. I wish his family had put our captain and chief-of-police as the last eulogizers, instead of the first. They did Jimmy better. This is the wrong final note in his send-off. If I go down in the streets and my

blood splatters my badge, I want all my people waxing stoically about how terrible and unspeakable my leaving this world is to them, not about how happy and fulfilled I was in my last seconds.

This ground underneath my metal folding chair underneath Jimmy's funeral tent just shook too. I grip my chair bottom alongside my thighs to keep steady. There's a breeze hitting my hands and face, maybe that same breeze from the night he died. That park isn't too far from here. I hope every badge-less person here feels this breeze too. They owe it to Jimmy. But the ground. I'm jamming my heels against this ground holding up Jimmy's casket to keep from shaking. I gotta be steady. Not look freaked out.

Those here without badges can't feel the moving ground. So at least while I'm still sitting in this chair and have something to grab onto, none of them will see me shaking.