

Ogden Park

I heard most of this story from Jorge, the Puerto Rican guy who sleeps in the bunk below me, while we both made sandwiches in the kitchen. It's about Chicago.

Down here on the south side in Englewood, the neighborhood I've lived in for a year (well, since my latest divorce, so more than a year) there is this AirB&B on the east side of Ogden Park. It's one of those wood frame houses metaled over with the siding seen ad nauseum throughout Back of The Yards, Englewood and West Englewood. Two empty lots border it on each side. One green with unkempt grass, and the other tire-rutted and muddy from various cars staying for the weekend. Twenty-four travelers can cram into its two stories plus finished basement, and on summer weekends, they do.

Back in the beginning when she inherited the house, Nina, after the singer I guess, only had the one floor suitable for living. The basement was still a cave of moist cement, the attic just that, an attic, and the AirB&B count in the city in the single digits. And those with beds under \$20 numbering only Nina's. By the summer of 2015, Nina had made enough to rehab the attic and the basement into bedrooms. She also harbored some long term clientèle. The short-termers still showed up but had less of the house and so less of the energy. Their tourist discovery highs swallowed up by our "seen it before" temperament. Every once in a while into the stoicism of the long-termers comes a fairy of light and magic. These creatures are a big pain in the ass, trust me.

Amber descended on Chicago to learn Google coding or some kind of smartphone thing in just six easy weeks. She was a black girl from the suburbs of Toledo, and staying away from home for the first time made her giddy, or the constant intake of vodka and cranberry made her giddy. No, she was already giddy, so alcohol just amplified it. Most nights around midnight giddy twisted toward havoc. Like if Cinderella's carriage transformed into a Jetta convertible at midnight instead of back to a pumpkin?

"Where you from, Ray," Amber asked the tall lanky man boiling water on the stove. A box of Kraft Mac & Cheese and a can of tuna sat on the counter. "How long have you been here? What bedroom are you in? You like tuna in your mac and cheese, I see."

Ray stirred his non-boiling water and answered all Amber's questions with just one short declarative sentence, "I live here."

To some extent it did answer a lot of her questions but not all of them. Lee walked in the kitchen out of the summer heat just before Amber unleashed another barrage of questions. Ray probably thanked god because everyone in the house knew Amber was sweet on Lee. Everyone except for Anton who came in every night around ten thirty and went straight to bed in the basement only to rise at 5am and headed off to some mysterious job no one had the balls to ask about, but even he might have known because it was that obvious Amber was sweet on Lee.

"Hi, Lee," Amber said.

Lee, a short Brazilian guy in his late twenties, who truncated his name when he landed in New York City six months earlier because every one in Brooklyn tried to pronounce it in Spanish. Eventually, knowing there was a nation outside NYC, unlike most New Yorkers, he headed west to see what the rest of the country held. He'd been in Chicago a week, and he planned to stay for three months at least, and that meant he needed a source of income.

"How are you, Amber?" he asked after greeting her with a peck on the cheek

"Lovely. I was just getting Ray's life story." Ray emptied his box of macaroni with a swoosh into his boiling water. "How was your day?" she asked Lee.

"Not bad. I found a job."

Amber squinted her eyes and guessed correctly, "is it in a restaurant?"

"Yes."

"In the kitchen?"

"Yes."

“You said you hated those.”

“I need the money,” I'm sure Lee watched himself tick down the latter of Amber's heart. While probably a good thing, it could only offend him, “you don't like I am poor.”

Amber blinked in confusion at the reprimand but quickly figured out the confusion, “no, no, I'm sad you're not doing what you want to do. You should always do what you want.”

Lee smiled, “I am doing what I want. I'm here.”

“Okay but...” Amber couldn't come up with anything to counter that sentiment and just decided to change the subject, “...you want a drink?”

“Sure.”

Vodka poured in to cranberry. No ice. Never any fucking ice in the house. Somebody fill the trays, please.

“You want some, Ray?”

He nodded but didn't move to serve himself and continued to fork the tuna out of the can into his mac and cheese.

Vodka poured into cranberry. Never any ice, god damn it.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks,” said Ray

The vodka gone, the cranberry long gone, long after midnight four people sat around the dining room table in varying degrees of drunk.

“Let's go out for a walk,” Amber said.

Lee came up out of his study of the cards on the communal pile of the game of Egyptian Ratscrew, “it's 2 in the morning, sweetly,” when drunk, Lee always fucked up English pet names.

Ray sat tall and much to no one's surprise silent. Jorge slumped in slumber. His chin on his chest. His hands still held his cards up, and the son of a bitch held the biggest hand.

“We're going for a walk.”

“No, we're not.”

“Yes, we am.”

“No, we are not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You? Alone? I don't think so.”

Now Lee's denial of Amber had a lot to do with the neighborhood she planned to walk in at 2 in the morning, but even in the best of north side neighborhoods he might of contested the suggestion. A respectable woman alone late at night just wasn't done.

“I'm going,” and she got up from the table.

“Fine, you go,” Lee said exasperated.

“Come with.”

“No,” he huffed.

“Fine. I'm going.”

Lee enjoyed calling her bluff. No way she'd venture out in to the Englewood night on her own. She'd be back at the table in a minute.

“Which way are you going?” Jorge asked. The untucked tail of his button-shirt fluttered in the breeze.

Lee, Ray and Jorge stood on the sidewalk in front of the house. None of them wanted to be there, but Lee's anxiety of letting Amber go out tugged at the other two's sense of chivalry. What kind of man lets a woman go out alone, drunk, at night, into Englewood?

“I'll go through the Park,” Lee said.

Ogden Park, one of those old south side parks with a big field house built for the Germans or the Irish or Scots who originally inhabited the neighborhood. Nothing has been built for the current residents. Trees lined the winding pedestrian paths and the summer leaves enhanced the menace especially where they grew low enough to block...night in the hood, why do I always describe it like the woods in a fairy tale, all menace and dread? Anyway it looked like a cop car sat up by the basketball courts, so Lee was safe.

Ray walked to 63rd and bought two squares off the cigarette guy stationed outside Brothers' Sandwich Shop. He paid in two quarters, 3 dimes, 5 pennies and the nickel he bummed from Amber earlier. He lite one and bullshitted with the cigarette guy for a couple of minutes. The cops had pinched the previous guy two days ago but he also sold weed, so the new guy figured he'd last longer. Fucking cops. Amber didn't walk by, so Ray said goodbye and headed home.

Since Ray headed over to 63rd, Jorge headed down to 65th. He wouldn't go any further south. The lights along Racine after 65th were out for two blocks and had been at least since May. He ran through his protocols as he walked: change sides if 2 or more approach, hands out of pockets at all times, if an encounter is inevitable meet in the middle of the street - cars drove Racine at all times of nights, and though not constant, headlights glowed frequently enough to hinder any crime longer than a purse-snatching. Fuck, not a single car passed as he walked to 65th. His heart raced the whole time, and every shadow hid a killer. Jorge reached 65th and turned around and hurried back to where the cop could see him. Amber didn't go south anyway.

"So you rushed out to protect me," Amber gushed, her arm intertwined with Lee's.

"Yes, I guess so. Let's go through the park", Home stood on the far side, right in the middle, so going around would take twice as long, "I'm tired."

"Lets go around, enjoy the night."

"I'm tired and drunk," Lee pulled her off the sidewalk and on to the grass between baseball diamond and soccer field.

"I would have been fine if you didn't come get me, you know."

Amber didn't tell Lee she had fingered the mace in her pocket when she saw the unidentified male walking toward her, but he saw her relief on her face before it transformed into smugness.

"I'm sure you would have, but now we get a nice short walk." The cop car rolled down the walkway from the basketball courts headed toward the corner of 64th and Racine where the curb cut was. "I guess the cop woke up."

"Must be the end of his shift," Amber said.

They stopped to let the car go by, first mistake. It jerked to a quick halt like the driver made the decision at the last moment. If they'd been on the other side, the cop probably wouldn't have decided to end his night up with a little law enforcement. It being easier to yell at people from the driver's side as you're blocking their path.

"The park's closed," he even shown his flashlight from one face to the other.

"Okay, officer, we are just walking through," Lee explained.

"Where you two going?"

"What? You don't have anything better to do than harass two people in the park?" The light and four eyes shot over to take in Amber. She stared with big black dilated pupils directly into the light because that was directly at the officer, "get that out of my eyes."

"Listen, sweetie, I don't need any shit from you, so shut up and let your boyfriend talk."

"Fuck you," Amber tried to pull Lee around the front of the car. Lee didn't budge, frozen in fear as he was.

The car door opened, "okay, now I need to see your ID," and the short stocky white officer stood and pointed at Lee.

Slow as an afternoon shadow across a barbershop window Lee turned his face away from Amber's and toward the cop. He prayed he'd come up with some way out of this mess by the time he faced the authorities. But only "me?" came out of his mouth when he finally looked the cop in the eyes.

"You're getting a ticket."

"Me?" Lee asked again.

"Just give me your ID, okay, buddy."

Lee looked over at Amber whose face had rage all over it. Then he asked another question, "what if I don't have one?"

"Come on, give me your passport or something."

"Don't you dare give it to him, Lee."

"You hush, and you just give it here."

"I don't have it on me. I don't have anything on me. I just came out to find..." and he pointed toward Amber.

Amber snorted a little laugh. What a farce. Wait until she posted this.

"Then I have to take you in."

"For being in a park after it's closed? That's insane."

"You shut your mouth, or I'll arrest you too."

"You won't arrest me. Just let him go," Amber suggested.

"Regulations say if you attempt to ticket a perpetrator who fails to provide an acceptable form of ID then the officer must detain said perpetrator until his identity can be establish or a judge sets bail."

"Holy Christ, is this your first day on the job or something? Fine, I'll go get it for him."

"Oh no, you aren't leaving my sight. Where do you live and we'll go together."

"Don't," Lee said, "just arrest me."

The officer arrested Lee.

You see Lee actually had his passport on him but what he didn't have was a current visa. The one he got into the country on had expired 3 months prior and he didn't want to get deported if the police man bothered to check.

"Doesn't he think he'll get deported once they empty his pockets and locked him up?" Ray asked Amber after she told the story safely back at the AirB&B.

"I don't know what he was thinking," she answered.

Lee got out of jail the next day, I don't remember how it worked, but he wasn't deported. He moved in with three other Brazilians over on 57th and Prairie. He's still in town I think.

For the price of tuition, Amber's school had promised her a job in Chicago after she graduated. They lied or false advertising or something and didn't get her one, so she ended up going back to the suburbs of Toledo to live with her folks a little longer.

After Lee's arrest the CPD, and one time the Cook County Sheriff department, decided to get nosy about the house on the east side of Ogden where all these people (obviously not black) went. Three times that summer police bounded up the porch stairs and through the unlocked front door. Three times, every time without a warrant. Having the cops pay attention to her home and how she made money gave Nina a horrible stomach ache. She got snippy with everybody, declaring anyone who let the cops in would be immediately evicted. Low key people, be low key and come in the back door. Sure, Nina's place is probably illegal and not up to any kind of code, but Englewood is not the part of the city where Chinese tourist showering in non hotel-standard bathrooms is the biggest most pressing problem. But all those city paper pushers who give out permits and license and other government stamps of approval need to justify their jobs, so when their goon squad shows up in your house you get nervous. A fence with a coded gate went up after that, and the front door stayed locked.

The third cop-intrusion surprised the shit out of me. It was the one time I was home and reading in the front room. A dude stuck his head in, saw me and continued on through the door. A few of his cop buddies wandered in after him. They looked lost as they surveyed the forty something white guy sitting on a new Ikea couch with a trundle beds tucked underneath.

"Excepting something else," I laughed, "you're back again, are you?"

"Back?"

"Jesus, don't you guys bother talking to each other? Whatever. Have fun."

I went back to reading. It was only the cops.

The End