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While my mother was busy attending to the needs of my very sick little brother, I was trying to adapt to my new environment. We moved into a house on Winbourne Avenue, in the Westside 19th ward neighborhood during the middle of my fifth grade school year. I left a rural school in Newark, where the only things I had to worry about was hearing the occasional use of the word Nigger, and entered a city school, where almost all of the students were black and where everyone knew each other and had grown up together. I was once again an outsider, but this time it was different, unlike my move to the rural school, very few of my peers accepted me as one of them, they tested me from day one.

Entering that classroom for the very first time was like culture shock to me, unlike my other school experiences where the entire class and the entire school was composed of virtually all white kids, this class was all black, except for one Puerto Rican and one white kid. As I entered the class and was introduced by my teacher, who, unlike the student body, was white, I glanced around and saw the only faces that were smiling were the girls. They started giggling and whispering as all the boys gave me their hardest looks while they checked me out. I wanted to turn around and run out of that classroom, run all the way home to my mother and tell her that this was not the place for me, that they had made a mistake but I just sat down, put my head down and tried really hard not to make eye contact with anyone.

The girls in the class went out of their way to say 'hi' and introduce themselves, then run off and giggle with each other, looking at me and pointing. I wasn't into girls yet so their actions did more to embarrass me than anything else. The boys in the classroom all watched as the girls would giggle and talk amongst each other about the cute new boy in class with the curly hair, so of course, within the first few days at my new school, a few of the boys had to test me.

One day, I was walking through the hallway, in a single file line with the rest of my class when another class passed us heading the other way and one of the boys in that class timed my steps perfectly, placed his foot out in front of me and tripped me, making me stumble into the boy walking in front of me. Everyone in his class laughed and pointed as I stumbled into one of the main boys giving me dirty looks the entire week. He angrily turned around and said, "what's your problem white boy? Push me again and I'm going to fuck you up." The other boys in my class snickered and slapped each other high-five and instigated the situation by whispering in tones loud enough to ensure everyone could hear them, "oooooooooh, you better be careful Dominique, that white boy is going to beat you up!" To which Dominique replied, "oh, so you think you're tough? Today after school I'm going to beat your ass."

My heart raced as I looked around trying to figure out what to do, my instinct told me to punch him in his face right there, take my hand and try to knock his teeth down his throat, but my mind wouldn't let me do it, I couldn't formulate the courage to swing at him right there and then. Why did this boy want to fight me, what did I do to him? This was new to me, I didn't understand the rules or the social norms and why they were calling me "white boy?" I'd never been called that before. I'd been called black boy or a Nigger and heard the term applied to me, but never had I been referred to as a white boy. My mind was racing, my heart was pounding and I was unable to

speak or act, I just stared at the floor and continued to walk with the class.

For the rest of that day I had a sick feeling in my stomach as anxiety took over. Most of the boys in the class would look at me and pound their fist in their hands and point at the clock as they laughed and slapped each other five. For the first time I wasn't sure what to do, this was the first time that I had to deal with feeling like an entire classroom was out to get me, feeling like I had absolutely no one to turn to or nowhere to go.

A few of the girls in my classroom told the boys to chill out and eventually one of the girls told the teacher that the boys were planning on fighting me after school. The teacher eventually pulled me out of the classroom and asked if I was okay. What was I supposed to do, where I came from we never told the teacher on each other, that was a no-no and a surefire way to get your ass beat! I wanted to say, "I'm scared, I don't want to fight" but I couldn't bring myself to say anything, instead I just shook my head yes or no to her questions, fought back the tears and denied that anyone was planning on fighting. She knew better and kept me after school to "help me with some work." By the time I left the school, everyone was gone and I was able to walk home without a confrontation, but I knew the next day would bring more of the same.

I remember coming home and my stepfather asking me how my day went. I wanted to tell him what happened, the last thing I wanted was to tell my mother, she would get too upset and worked up about it, but telling my stepfather was not an option. I had no trust in him and I knew there was nothing positive that could come from me sharing my fears with him; he would have told me to man up or beat me for not standing my ground with them, or would have told me that I needed to stop being soft and be a man. How could I get him or anyone to understand that being soft was not the issue, that it is hard to be a man when you have to face an entire classroom full of people that are threatening to beat you up; that I didn't know what "being a man" meant but I did know that if it meant being like him, that a man was something I wasn't interested in becoming.

Eventually, after they got to know me, I became fairly popular with most of the kids at school. However, the real hard asses, the boys that thought they were super bad and worked hard to make sure everyone knew it, they took an immediate dislike to me and I became the target of their taunts and eventually their physical assaults. In retrospect, I understand their position; I was the new kid, the pretty boy as some called me, that all the girls giggled about. All the kids that used to idolize the tough acting boys were now focusing their attention on me. When you're young and lack the proper guidance, insecurities that are a part of every pre-teen's ego become exaggerated and you become hypersensitive. Their defense against these insecurities was to attack anything that did not make them feel superior, anyone that took the social focus off them was seen as the enemy, and what better way to bring the focus back to them than to put their envisioned enemy on the spot, especially if that enemy was different than them in some easily identifiable way.

I was aware of what people wore and how I dressed for the first time, not because I cared about it, but because boys in school would crack jokes, something we called "drilling", on anyone that came to school with pants that were too tight, or shoes that everyone knew once belonged to an older brother or hair that was out of place. Lunch time was the most feared time of day, that was when the kids that could drill the hardest would move from table to table and pick out people to drill on, anytime they would come to my table my heart would race and I would silently pray that they skipped over

me.

Pre-teen years are filled with insecurities and uncertainties, and having someone expose things that you were already insecure about to an entire group of your peers can be devastating. I remember wearing a brand new pair of sneakers to school and never thinking twice about how they looked until my boy Richard drilled on them and said they looked like ugly ass snow-shoes that an Eskimo threw away. Everyone laughed and pointed at my sneakers. I spent the rest of the day looking at them trying to figure out why he said what he said. Often there was no real logic behind it, many times the drills didn't even relate to the person or the topic at hand, if they were funny and people laughed, the insecurities would take over and do the rest. After that day my mother had to fight with me to wear those sneakers again even though no one said another word, I hated those sneakers and couldn't wait until the day that I got some new ones so I could throw them away.

After a while, I got pretty good at drilling and was able to hold my own with the best of them. However, it never failed, as soon as I would start getting the best of someone, they would immediately make a "white boy" comment. This only intensified after my mother showed up at the school a few times and my classmates got to see her, then the white boy comments came almost daily and the wannabe hoods became much more aggressive, trying to instigate fights almost daily. They would rarely fight each other as deep down, they were really just scared kids trying to look tough, but an opportunity to fight a white boy was something that all of them wanted to take advantage of.

White kids were seen to be weak, less aggressive and usually easy victims to bully or to pick on as there were only a handful of white students at the school, so even if they stood together, they would still be vastly outnumbered and easily defeated in a conflict. Most of the white kids avoided the hoods and stayed to themselves. I avoided the white students like the plague, to be identified as being white or as rolling with the white kids would have meant even more torment and opened me up to more instances of fighting or being jumped. Most of the fights between the black hoods were head-up fights, one-on-one where the strongest, best fighter would win, but fights with the white kids always ended in four or five black kids jumping one white kid. I don't think I ever witnessed a single head-up fight between a black and white kid in elementary school, not once.

I wanted to shed anything that might associate me with being white, anything that might open me up to the vicious attacks that the white kids had to endure. I started to find excuses for my mother to not come to the school and tried to limit any opportunities that my classmates might have to be able to associate me with having any connection to the white world. My mother was always actively involved in my life, always signing me up for sports and activities and taking me everywhere. I began to wish she would just stay home and stay away from all the school events, the parent teacher conferences, anything where she could be identified as being my mother.

This in turn led to instances where I would embrace my stepfather's presence, however rare, at events and school gatherings. For my classmates to see that the man they all thought was my father, as being black, meant less torment for me, more acceptance and less chance of having to worry about being jumped or fighting after school. As much as I despised him in general, I grew to appreciate his presence in those situations and for the first time started to look to him for guidance to help me navigate this new world I had entered, looking for him to show me how a black man

was supposed to carry himself. Unfortunately for me, my grandfather was right when he said that my stepfather was not the one that should be acting as my role model, and in retrospect, he succeeded in demonstrating everything that a father, husband and more poignantly, a man should not be.

I was given the honor of being a school crossing guard. They gave me one of those orange vests with “Crossing Guard” written in big letters on the back and I couldn’t wait to put it on. I was proud and walked with my chest out a little further until my first day on the corner, right next to the school, when a group of the wannabe-thugs stopped on my corner waiting to cross. As soon as I held up the bright red “Stop” sign that all the crossing guards carried, I heard, “look at the white boy, trying to be a teacher’s pet,” followed by loud laughter and finger pointing by everyone. That was my first and last day as a crossing guard. I felt stupid for being proud and cursed myself under my breath for feeling good about doing something that I thought was helpful and I vowed to never again put myself in a position to feel humiliated like that.

My mother realized something was wrong, I was always sad and withdrawn and rarely did I play with any friends from school, instead I spent most of my time with the girl that lived next door. We would play music, do arts and crafts and spend hours outside playing in her backyard. She helped me rediscover my love for music and we would listen to her father’s cassette tapes in her basement and write down the lyrics to songs by groups like the J. Geils Band, Olivia Newton John, and Hall and Oates.

All of my free time was spent with her, and my stepfather suggested to my mother that it was weird that I wasn’t spending that time playing outside with boys my age. His concern was not based on the troubles I was having at school that neither he nor my mother were aware of, but rather he expressed his theory to my mother in a conversation I overheard when he said, “I think that boy might be a fag or something. He never plays outside doing any boy shit, he’s always up underneath that neighbor girl, playing dolls or something.”

Of course, my mother was much more in tune with her oldest child and had long suspected that I was having some issues at school so when she approached me to talk about my time with the neighbor girl, she was much more gentle and focused on the unknown issues at school. I again dismissed her concern as being nothing but I did explode about what I overheard my stepfather say to her. She was stunned, she had no idea I overheard the conversation but she said, “you know he can be a jerk sometimes, don’t worry about what he said.” Conversations like that kept me close to my mother and acted as a reminder that we were on the same team, that for whatever reason this man was in our lives, she was not going to let him come between her and I. Despite our conversation, my stepfather convinced my mother that I needed to do more “manly” things so he signed me up to play football that summer and my journey with the Southwest Colts began.

My stepfather knew the head coach for the Pop Warner football team in my neighborhood so he took me to the field and introduced me to the coaches and told them about my experience playing the previous season. A bunch of the dudes from my school were playing on the team as well and a few of them nudged each other when they saw me and said, “look at the white boy trying to play, we are going to eat his ass up.” The team had already received their equipment and everyone was already

engaged in full contact practice, since I started late, I had to wait a week before I could get my gear and start full contact.

Because I was the new kid, the coaches immediately put me into the Monkey drill, the same drill in which Billy knocked the wind out of me the previous year. They matched me against Junior Praylor, one of the hardest hitting kids on the team, gave him the ball and blew the whistle. As everyone gathered around to watch, I could hear whispers of "get that White Boy Junior" and "lay his white ass out Junior." My heart was racing as I waited to hear the whistle blow and when it finally did, I jumped up, planted my shoulder cleanly into Junior's stomach, wrapped my arms around his legs, picked him up off the ground and slammed him down, hard on his back. The ball came flying out and I jumped off of Junior, grabbed the ball and ran it the other way while Junior lay on the ground trying to catch his breath!

Everyone's jaws dropped, the coaches looked around stunned and slapped each other high fives and then the "ooohs" and "aaaahs" started. Eventually everyone started saying, "damn, Jason laid him out" and "oh shit, that dude can hit." After that day, there was no more talk about "white boy" this or "white boy" that, unless it was a player from another team or one of the guys on our team that was trying to get under my skin or simply hating on me.

That day they put me in the Monkey drill with damn near every one of the hardest on the team, Clinton Morris, Jack Dees, Eric Granison, and I held my own with all of them. By the end of the day, I had earned the respect of the entire team and quickly earned a reputation as someone that would lay your ass out on the football field.

Through football I was able to meet many of the guys that would be attending my new 6th grade school. #3 school, which everyone called Interim, was located in the Cornhill neighborhood, close to downtown Rochester which meant that I had to catch a city bus to and from school. Because the school was not in my district, everyone in my neighborhood that attended Interim had to catch the city bus downtown and then transfer to another city bus that would take us directly to the school. Taking public transportation was my first real taste of freedom, and my first exposure to many of the young thugs from all over the city.

Every school day, kids from all over the city would catch the various city buses from their respective neighborhoods downtown on East Main Street. Buses carrying passengers from the eastside and the north side would stop on the eastside of the street, and across the street, passengers from the south and Westsides would exit and enter buses. All the kids headed to my school would congregate by the bus stop on the corner of Clinton Avenue and East Main Street to try to be the first on the bus in order to get a seat. These trips downtown was my first experience with the serious beef between the West side and the East side. I heard small talk during some of our football games that "we hate those mother fuckers from Baden Street" but I never heard any reasons for it and just assumed it was a sports related rivalry situation.

There were fights almost daily, usually head-up fights between two dudes over some girl or because one of them called the other one a name or some other trivial issue. But sometimes a real beef would start and involve ten or twenty or even fifty guys from each side of town. Rarely did these large rumbles take place because of a spur of the moment occurrence, they were usually the result of an event that was instigated over a short period of time in which each perspective combatant had enough time to spread the word and gather back up from their peers in whatever neighborhood they came from.

This was the early 1980's, I wouldn't say that Rochester had a serious gang problem, it was much more neighborhood based wherein groups of dudes that hung out together would usually back each other up during conflicts with those from outside their neighborhoods. It was not uncommon for adjacent neighborhoods to have beef with one another and frequently, fights would break out inside those neighborhoods. But whenever someone from any part of the Westside had a beef with someone from any part of the Eastside, the various neighborhoods would unite and each side would represent their entire side of town as one collective military type unit.

Most of the guys in these neighborhoods grew up with each other from birth or had known each other for years. I was the new kid on the Westside, except for Patrick, I had only known my new friends for a few months to a year at most. This made me an outsider amongst those in my hood and meant that I had to worry about beef with those that didn't know me, even in my own neighborhood. I had earned my respect on the football field amongst my teammates but there were plenty of young wannabe gangsters that had no idea who I was, they only knew that I was some light skinned new kid with no real ties to the area, thus with no real backup, so to them I was a potential victim waiting to happen.

My neighborhood was called the 19th ward and consisted of mainly wide streets lined with full grown trees and large houses, most built in the 1920's and 30's. The houses in the area were sought after for their hardwood floors, stained glassed windows and really large amounts of floor space. Most houses had a driveway and a garage, a decent size front yard, large enough so the houses would sit at least 10 feet or more away from the sidewalks and the roads and the backyards were usually good sized as well. Most of the yards were well manicured with neatly trimmed bushes and carefully tended to flowers and occupied by what would be considered middle class homeowners and working class tenants.

Some of the streets in the 19th ward were nicer than others and for the most part, the well-maintained and manicured homes lay in the fifty or so blocks between Genesee Street, Thurston Road and Brooks Avenue down close to Arnett Boulevard. There were some rough streets to the west of West High Terrace composed of more double and multiple family houses, in more disrepair and occupied by lower income families. And most of the streets that ran between Genesee and Plymouth Avenue were the same, with Jefferson Avenue being what most would easily identify instantly as the hood. The farther down Genesee you went, moving east and closer to Chili avenue and East Main Street, the more "hood" the area became, with scattered multiple unit apartment complexes, a few hole-in-the-wall bars and a low-income housing complex.

There were two high schools in the neighborhood, Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School, where I eventually attended, and James Madison High School. Madison was almost exclusively all black and had a long-standing reputation for being one of the worst schools in the area. In 1975, a student shot a hall sentry when he tried to break up a fight triggering media attention from all over the country and further strengthening Madison's notoriety.

Our football team would practice at the Wilson High School field, which was located at the Arnett YMCA on Arnett boulevard off Genesee Street, and our games were usually held at the Madison High School field which sat between Genesee Street and Jefferson Avenue.

While there was a diverse mix of white and black working class residents in the

middle areas of the 19th ward, the neighborhoods on the other side of Genesee street were almost exclusively black and living well below the poverty level. Most of the kids on the football team came from the poorer areas and our games were always a big draw for the entire neighborhood. Most of the time, our home games would be free from any type of violence or conflicts off of the field, but when the teams from the east side would come to play, there was almost always an incident, especially when we played the east side's Baden Street teams. One time, a game was interrupted when gunfire broke out as rival groups from both sides of town faced off, eventually leading to guns being fired close to one of the end zones while we were still on the field playing! The crazy thing is, after the crowds of young thugs that were responsible for the gun fire ran off in different directions, the referees blew their whistles and the game picked up right where we left off, like nothing ever happened!

Eventually things got so bad that the police started to work security for the crosstown games to make sure that no fights broke out. Many of the suburban teams refused to play us at home, partially because we would whip their asses so bad on the football field, but also because they were legitimately concerned about their safety off of the field. Ironically, I remember feeling secure knowing that our entire neighborhood was out there watching our back and the intimidation factor towards the other team seemed to give us all a boost of confidence going into those games. Being young, the thought never once crossed my mind that a stray bullet could easily have struck anyone of us, instead we reveled in the fact that other teams were afraid to play us at home and we embraced our serious home-field advantage.

The potential for violence outside of the field was not the only intimidation factor involved; our Midget level team made up of the oldest kids, and our Junior Midget Teams, both went two consecutive seasons without losing a single game, and both of the teams I played on went two seasons straight not allowing an opponent to score a single touchdown or field goal! Our neighborhood may have been full of gangsters and gangster wannabes but we also had some serious athletes and knowledgeable, dedicated coaches to help guide us.

One coach in particular, everyone called him Tootsie, was the roughest, hardest, foulest mouthed son-of-a-bitch you can imagine and we all loved him to death! Coach Tootsie was light skinned with what looked like an old burn or birthmark that discolored half of his face. He would grab me by my face mask, get right in my face and yell, "Bost, you fucking bastard, get your pussy ass up and hit someone like you mean it! You ain't no goddamn man, you hit like a bitch!" Then he would have us do the drills over and over and over again until we did them right.

Tootsie would always point me out and say, "goddamn it, that Bost has heart! Now that's how you lay a mother fucker out!" Tootsie's approach would definitely be considered inappropriate by today's standards, but I never felt intimidated by him, only inspired. He helped make me a tougher, more focused player on the field, and more importantly, off the field, he reinforced ideas of respect and taught me that I could push myself and accomplish things that I never imagined were possible. Last I heard, Tootsie had just turned 80 years old and he was still giving every single day to the kids from our neighborhood. How can you repay someone like that? Hopefully these words will begin to suffice and one day he will smile knowing how much of a positive impact he had on all of our lives.

While I earned everyone's respect on the field, off the field was a completely different story. I was cool with most of the kids on my team and there was a group of

us that would always hang together outside of football. Clint Morris and Junior Praylor both lived on West High Terrace, one street over from my house on Elmdorf Avenue, so if I wasn't hanging out with Patrick then I was hanging out with them. Junior lived with his dad, who was a coach for our team, and his older brother Vincent. Clint's mother was the team manager and was a constant figure at all of our games, cheering louder than anyone and attempting to inspire us with her support.

Many of the parents from our neighborhood were actively involved with the team. They would work selling hot dogs and soda at the games, help set up the field, transport us back and forth to practices and games and host events to help raise money for the team. These were the working-class parents, the parents with what most would have called “good jobs” at that time, most doing manufacturing work at Xerox or Kodak or IBM, all companies that were headquartered or started in Rochester. Single parent homes existed but they were not the norm at that time. Most of us came from a household with two parental units, and those of us that didn't, came from homes where the primary parent had a “good job.” There were some on the team, maybe 30 to 40 percent, that came from what would be considered to have been “poor” or impoverished households, most with a parent or parents that were involved with drugs, unemployed or simply unable to hold down a job because of mental health issues.

While none of us considered ourselves to be poor, in retrospect, we were definitely what would now be called working poor. The manufacturing jobs barely paid a living wage and just provided enough money for some to purchase houses within the city, but they would not be considered even close to middle class wages by today's standards. Alcoholism and drug use was commonplace, even among those of us coming from “traditional” two parent households. There were a few fathers that would show up to the games stumbling drunk, reeking with the smell of Wild Irish Rose, and we all saw plenty of fights between parents at our games and practices, but this wasn't unusual to us. This was just another day, just how things seemed to flow, it was our normalcy and it was all that most of us had ever known.

But I knew that there was another world, I knew that not everyone lived like this, I knew that not every football game ended with someone fighting in the stands or shots being fired. I witnessed life from a very different perspective prior to moving to Rochester, and my previous experiences and lessons were in serious conflict with my new environment and the new laws that were required to survive within it. I experienced poverty before, I experienced violence and all the elements that come along with living in an impoverished environment, but those experiences were in mostly white or somewhat equally racially mixed environments. This environment was black, almost exclusively black, the rules were foreign to me and I was learning that my previous instincts could not be trusted.

Adolescence can be problematic for most as we begin questioning ourselves. Early planted seeds of self-doubt begin to receive nourishment and often grow uncontrollably into complex emotional gardens. A new environment with new rules, an environment in which most of your peers treat you as an outsider and mentally and physically attack you, further irrigates those seeds until they grow into a burdensome bush with tangled branches adorned with pain inflicting thorns.

The uncertainty and self-doubt associated with the pre-teen years was magnified for me as I was once again forced to confront the fact that, in the eyes of my peers, I was different than they were. My white friends were white, my black friends were black

and I was both, yet neither at the same time. Most of my friends from the football team were sincere and genuine with their questions regarding my race. Usually, when we were alone, they might say, "why is your mom white?" or "what are you? Are you white or black?" These questions immediately made me uncomfortable because I did not have any answers, I didn't know why my mother was white, I only knew that she was my mother and I didn't know why my father was black, and I damn sure had no idea what that made me.

I was fortunate enough to find a few good friends that seemed to be wise beyond their years and had very little interest in my racial composition. They asked an occasional question about my mother or father but it was no different than the inquiries I made about them or their families. Their questions came from a place of deeper learning, from a true curiosity about who I was and why we seemed to get along so well.

I never had a problem making friends, people, both old and young, have always seemed to enjoy my presence and usually within a few minutes of meeting me, most people feel comfortable and at ease. My mother told me that this was always the way people were with me, that babies would smile at me, strangers would start conversations with her about me and that girls of all ages always went out of their way to babysit or to simply say 'hi,' she said she had never seen anything like it before. Now of course a mother's opinion of her child has the risk of being slightly biased, but at the risk of sounding completely full of myself, I would agree with her early descriptions and go so far as to add that those experiences have continued well into my adult years.

With my ability to meet new people, making new friends should have posed little to no problem for me, and it didn't, until we moved to Rochester. I found that the smile that always preceded my introducing myself to someone new, was often greeted with a frown and a sucking of one's teeth or a hardened stare, especially from older guys. Before I could say anything they would greet me with a, "what you looking at white boy?" or "what you smiling at nigga?" I had no idea how to respond or why anyone would go out of their way to make someone feel so uncomfortable. Being friendly was in my nature and everything that I was taught supported this nature; be polite, make eye contact when you introduce yourself, be kind to people. None of this seemed to apply in my new world, and my adolescent struggles made me question myself so of course I felt like I was the problem, like I was the one who was wrong and I realized that this new world was not going to change to accommodate me, so internal change was essential for my survival.

The bus rides to school provided an opportunity to study the cool dudes, the gangsters and the wannabe gangsters. I would sit on the bus and quietly listen to every word that they said, observe the way the older hoods dressed, walked and talked, even their body language and the way they sat or stood on the bus. I would secretly emulate them, changing my position in my seat to mimic the way I saw them sitting. Whenever anyone would catch me looking at them, I would quickly dart my eyes towards the ground or look out of a window, do anything I could to avoid hearing someone say, "what the fuck are you looking at white boy?"

In the mornings, as we all congregated downtown waiting for the transfer bus to take us to school, I would meet up with some of my friends from the football team and practice some of the new slang I'd picked up on the bus; I would find ways to slowly inject my new vocabulary into conversations saying things like, "yo that hat is fresh," and "yo, chill Nigga." The term "Nigga" was used in almost every sentence to

mean a variety of different things. "What's up my Nigga?" was a way we would greet each other, or "yo, that's my Nigga right there," would be used to let an outsider know the person being referred to was a friend.

The word was used so frequently and so often that I quickly forgot about how I had once beat the shit out of a kid damn near every day because he referred to my sister as a "Nigger." But there was a definite distinction in who could use the word and any one considered white could catch a serious beat down for including it in their vocabulary. A few times, when passing a rival group of teenage boys from across town or outside of our neighborhood, someone would stop us if they heard me say it, and say, "who the fuck you calling Nigga white boy? We should fuck you up right now." Both groups would stop walking and generally, before I could even say a word, someone from my group would say, "he ain't no white boy mother fucker, keep it moving, you don't want none." After hard looks were exchanged and fingers were pointed, everyone would continue on their way but someone would always yell a warning to me and let me know that if they caught be by myself, it would be on and popping.

Besides the trips to and from school, #3 school was a much more accepting and much less hostile environment compared to #37 school. The school was extremely diverse with students and teachers representing a true cross section of the racial and socio-economic spectrum. The majority of students came from homes in which the parents were actively involved in their children's education and as such, pushed hard for their kids to get accepted into the school.

It was not a traditional public school in the sense that only those in the neighborhood could attend, instead it was a magnet school, which had much higher academic standards and meant students had to take tests and be placed on a list from which they were chosen, in order to attend. The school's curriculum was focused on technology and they were one of the first schools in the country to provide computer classes. Our class was the first to have computers in our classroom and we all took computer classes on the brand new Radio Shack TRS-80! In about 15 minutes, we would write programs that would use all of the memory in the computers and they would set aside 10 minutes at the end of each class for us to save our work onto cassette tapes. It is laughable now but at that time, those computers were cutting edge and we all felt special to have been chosen to participate in those classes.

The focus on higher academic standards helped take away some of the negativity generated by academic success that would often come from my peers. School was not considered "cool" and most of the "cool" kids, the kids that everyone looked up to and admired, worked hard to at least portray an image that school was "whack" and uncool. This was certainly the case at #37 school, where consistently doing your homework would mean that someone would call you out for trying to "act white" and eventually lead to someone challenging you to fight. The belief was that if you were concerned with school and academic success then you were "trying to be white" and everyone knew that whites in that setting were bound to get their asses kicked.

Most of us at #3 School knew that we were there because we had earned the right to be there, and the racial and economic diversity, as well as the focus on academics, took away some of that "trying to be white" stigma when anyone showed success in the classroom. However, there were still plenty of knuckleheads at the school and plenty of wannabe gangsters to challenge anyone they thought were weak.

Before attending #3 school, my short time at #37 school made me self-

conscience about participating in the classroom and definitely made me think twice before I answered a question that might provide my classmates an opportunity to perceive me as trying to be “white.” I learned fairly quickly that the white kids caught hell and the quickest way to draw unwanted attention to yourself was to “act white.”

While #3 school was racially diverse inside of the classrooms, outside of the classrooms, in social settings, the school appeared just as segregated as any school you might imagine existed in the deep-south during the 1950s. This became apparent to me during the first school dance I attended. The dances were held inside the school gymnasium, which had a large sectioned wall that could be pulled out to divide the gym into two equally sized separate gym rooms. Both sides of the gym were decorated identically, with colorful streamers hung overhead, connecting the basketball rims at all sides of the gym, and student created posters hanging on the walls representing some of the anti-drug slogans being promoted at the time by Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign.

Walking into the gym created an unanticipated racial epiphany; the social division that I previously was only subconsciously aware of was now laid out literally, in black and white. One side of the gym contained all but a handful of the white students and the other side was almost exclusively black and Latino. While the scene shocked the conscience, it was somewhat understandable once you heard the music blaring out of the speakers in the separate sides. The white side was playing records from AC/DC, Metallica and Journey and was filled with giggling white girls, adorned in black lace gloves, skin tight Jordache jeans and t-shirts that exposed one or both of their shoulders, all dancing among themselves in the center of the gym. Gathered around the walls of the gym in small groups, were their white male counterparts, wearing AC/DC t-shirts, spiked wrist bands, and ripped jeans with chains dangling from the wallets in their back pockets. The “white” side of the gym was policed by almost all white teachers and the parents of the students, who were obviously also all white.

The speakers on the other side of the gym were vibrating to songs by hip-hop groups like Run-DMC, Whodini and the Fat Boys, and R&B groups like New Edition, the Gap Band, and of course Michael Jackson and Prince. The Black and Latina girls congregated in small groups spread out in the middle of the gym, wearing the same styles as their white female counterparts on the “white-side” of the gym, except every single girl on this side of the gym was wearing a shirt covered in Michael Jackson, Prince or New Edition buttons. Just like on the other side of the gym, the male students all hung around the wall of the gym in small groups, watching the girls dance and teasing each other about being scared to go dance with one of the girls. The boys were wearing shell-toed Adidas or suede Puma sneakers with fat shoe-laces that matched the same color as their tight-fitting polo shirts and colored Levi jeans.

As any pre-teen would do, I advocated fiercely for my mother to just drop me off and not chaperone the dance as she had intended on doing. Entering the gym, I felt an immediate sense of self-consciousness as the internal conflict of my own racial identity seemed to be magnified 100 times by the literal division of the races in each separate side of the gym. I was incredibly thankful that I did not have to walk into that divided gym with my mother as most of my friends were on the “black-side” of the gym and I know my mother’s white skin would have subjected me to spoken and unspoken ridicule from my peers. While my friends all knew that my mother was white and my father was black and seemed to accept me without looking at me as being different than they were, I knew that my mother’s presence would surely create issues

with those outside of my circle and I was certain I would find myself once again attempting to protect myself from those looking to jump a “white boy.”

I felt guilty for feeling relieved that my mother hadn’t come in with me. I knew she only wanted to see me enjoy myself, and as much as I said I didn’t want her coming to any of my events, I enjoyed having her there, knowing that I had someone on the sidelines or close by that was there for my support. Part of it was just adolescent rebellion but a larger part was knowing that her presence may draw attention to the fact that I was racially different than my peers, that they could justifiably call me “white boy” and that I would have to deal with the physical and emotional consequences of their taunts and attacks.

Dealing with my heightened insecurities caused by the racially divided gym was bad enough, but my true fear was that one of those girls that would always giggle and say “hi” whenever I walked by might work up the courage to walk across that gym and ask me to dance in front of everyone! As much as all of my boys bragged about what girls they were going to “get with” and what they planned on doing to those girls when they “got with them,” most of us were scared as hell to do anything that might actually give us an opportunity to get close to a girl. But that fear was no match for the hormones that were now starting to heavily influence my body and my thoughts.

My heart felt like it would beat right out of my chest when I would look up and see a group of girls looking in my direction, a part of me prayed they wouldn’t say anything, but another part of me was begging for a chance to talk to one of them, for a chance to “get with” one of them, despite not knowing what “get with” meant.

It was at these early dances that I started to realize that I was pretty popular with the girls. Girls had always made themselves comfortable around me and I always had plenty of female friends, but the dances were the first time I noticed them really “noticing” me, and it was the first time that I realized that I was starting to “notice” them as well.