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THE PRISON WE CALLED HOME

Siobhan Brooks

I was born in the Sunnydale housing projects in San Francisco on July 14, 1972. My mother had been living in the Haight Ashbury district, where she used to take pictures of the Bay Bridge from her apartment, but the rents increased and white people moved in, so she had to move. Being a single Black woman without a high school diploma, the projects were the only place she could find to live. And Sunnydale, known for its violence, always had vacancies.

These projects are the largest in San Francisco. Built during World War II, they look like red-and-white row houses. Though they are now predominantly Black (along with a few Asian, Latino, and Samoan families), they weren't always. White people used to live in them during the 1940s, when they functioned as military housing. Then the suburbs were built up, and white people went to live in those communities, keeping Blacks out, locked in the ghetto. It was strange for me to see old photos of Sunnydale with suburban-looking white families living there. The only white people who lived in Sunnydale when I was growing up were white women who mothered Black children and had been rejected from the white world.

Like most projects, Sunnydale had a reputation for violence, and was referred to as "Swampy Desert" or "Swampy D." My mother tried her best

to make our unit seem like home. She bought beads, curtains, a birdbath, and marble tables that she ordered from catalogues in order to make the house look nice, in spite of the roaches that lived in the corner of our stove. We covered our food with foil to keep them away. I used to love watching her decorate our place with contact paper, woodprints, plants, and bright fabric that she would sew onto our chairs. She bought the initials A and S (for Aldean and Stobhan) to place outside our door.

I felt most loved by my mother at Christmas, when she would buy me dozens of gifts—toys, dolls, games, and clothes. Christmas was her way of proving that we weren't poor, even though we lived in the projects. One Christmas she bought a gingerbread house and wrapped it up to surprise me. I was delighted. I had never had a gingerbread house. While we were looking at the frosting and the smiling gingerbread man, I noticed something brown on top of the house, moving. I pointed it out to my mother—it was a roach. My mother threw the gingerbread house across the room, then grabbed a hammer and crushed it to pieces. She said every racial slur toward Black people imaginable—because of her internalized racism, she often blamed her problems on being Black, not on the effects of white racism against us.

Once we were returning home from the circus and there was a horrible car accident. A little girl, also returning from the circus with her parents, got hit by a car and was killed. The driver was drunk, and the car had actually run through a liquor store; the girl was decapitated. As we approached the crowd, my mother, seeing something, led us in a different direction. We heard about the accident later on the news, and a Malcolm X mural was painted where the accident occurred, but there was no discussion as to why there were so many liquor stores in our area.

Another time there was a Black man running from unit to unit in Sunnydale breaking windows. He had been stabbed and wanted someone to call for help. My mother and I were relieved that he didn't break ours. We had bars on our windows to keep people from breaking in, but they also kept us locked in—if there had been a fire, they would have prevented our escape. Even so, we had our place broken into twice, both times through the door.

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While these events didn't happen every day in the projects, they are reflective of what it is like to grow up in them. Whether you're talking about projects in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, New Jersey, Philadelphia, New York, or Chicago, they all share the same incarcerating elements. While projects do have elements of culture, community, and resistance, they also have fear, sadness, hopelessness, and dramatically violent events that, no matter how infrequent, stay imprinted in the mind. There is limited access to space, a dearth of businesses, and intense social isolation. I remember riding the bus with my mother and passing banks, schools, and real-estate agencies, not realizing what they were. Most people in the projects carried cash and/or cashed their checks at a check-cashing place. Few people I knew had bank accounts.

The real-estate agencies were partly responsible for why Black people and other people of color could not live in safe housing. They often catered to the white elite, and steered people of color to the houses with the lowest property values. Poor people of color are forced to live in projects. For us, to be working class would have been a step up. We were the prelude to the working class, locked in a ghetto.

Growing up, we didn't have a playground. We went roof-hopping, played hide-and-go-seek in vacant apartment buildings, climbed trees. We tore the boards from the doorways of vacant units and rode them down nearby steps. We ate dirt, pulled sour grass and chewed on it. Later we were told it was called "sour grass" because the dogs peed on it.

Getting Exposure

The first time I entered a real house, I was eleven years old. I had a Filipina friend named Mary who lived a few blocks away, in one of the houses alongside Sunnydale populated mostly by Asians. Mary went to my elementary school; we were in the same third-grade class. I didn't know her well, but I noticed that she would walk the same way as me when my mother picked me up from school and disappear into one of those houses. One day she invited me over, out of the blue, and without asking my mother if it was O.K., I went.

I remember being amazed at how much space Mary and her family

had, compared to the one-bedroom unit with the six-foot ceiling my mother and I shared; Mary's house was like a mansion compared to any unit in Sunnydale. They had a garage, four bedrooms (each of her siblings had their own room), a spacious bathroom, a kitchen with tile floors (clean, no roaches), and a living room with a fireplace. I had never seen a house like that except on television. I remember feeling very small in her house. Her mother was sweet, but wary of me in the beginning, watching my every move. Like many immigrants, she had been taught to fear Black people, and I was the first Black person they had ever had in their house. Even though they lived only a few blocks away from us, we lived in different worlds.

Growing up in the projects, it was common for us to refer to where we lived as our "house." My friends would always ask if they could come over to my house, and vice versa; we never said, "Can I come over to your unit?" But after visiting Mary in a real house, I felt how marginal we were in the projects. Things they took for granted, like space, were new to me. Mary's windows opened up to the view of a garden in the back, birds, and blue sky, without bars.

That day Mary's mother made us Rice Krispies Treats, and we played in her garage. It changed my life forever. After being in their house I never wanted to go back to Sunnydale. I continued to visit after school for an hour and play, becoming exposed to a whole new world. Living in the projects is very similar to living on a Native American reservation—the projects are located on poorly kept land, isolated from the rest of society, and controlled by the government. I recently read that HUD builds the houses on reservations as well as in the projects.

For people living in projects, all roads lead to the ghetto. Our whole social world usually does not expand far from it. The schools we attend are often near our neighborhoods, and, because of our lack of property-value-generated revenue, they have poor funding and overcrowded classrooms. Everyone I knew from school lived in a ghetto or not far from one. I hardly ever met middle-class people—Black, Latino/a, Asian, or white. At school we learned more about our social status by the lack of care the teachers gave us. I remember a class where the social sciences

teacher just up and left class because he was tired of dealing with us. He was Black, and so were most of the students. During lunch we were not allowed to leave the campus, and we even had security guards standing outside the entrance. Sometimes the principal would use a lock and chain to keep us in. This was during a peak of gang activity in California, and the principal thought it was safer for us to stay inside during lunch. Once I cut class to visit a friend of mine at another school, which was mostly white; I was surprised by the amount of freedom they had. During lunch the students could sit outside on the grass, or leave the campus entirely.

Everywhere we went there was a police presence: school dances, the bus stop, a police helicopter flying over us at night. And we were always crowded into small spaces: the projects, the welfare lines, the bus. We never experienced the larger, open places in San Francisco. With inferior school systems and housing, the projects were often a prelude to the final form of incarceration: jail and prison. A few of the guys I grew up with ended up in jail, on probation, or dead, while the girls ended up single parents on welfare.

Planning My Escape

The older I got, the more I hated Sunnydale and all communities of color like it. This is contradictory to the notion of being "down" with the ghetto, which some confused Black middle- and working-class people glorify and romanticize (often in gangsta rap and narrow Black nationalist ideology)—usually out of some strange guilt at being spared the "Black" experience of growing up in poverty. Living in an anti-Black, self-hating household, it was easy for me to begin to hate where I came from and the people we lived among. Contrary to the popular belief that people live in the projects because they are not ambitious, or because they are too lazy to get out, my mother had very bourgeois values and manners, which I shared. I had already decided that I was not going to live in the projects when I got older, or be like the people who lived there: If you want to succeed, all you need to do is act right, I believed. I didn't understand, at age fourteen, that our oppression had nothing to do with good behavior and everything to do with structural racism and classism.

During my high school years, my mother spared me household chores so that I could focus on my schoolwork, reading, and writing. I was allowed to be selfish in a way most of my friends were not, and in this regard I had more in common with my white friends than my friends of color.

Growing up in a nonworking environment, I had no working-class identity, and actually began to look down on people who were "just workers." I was going to be a thinker, a writer. When I was sixteen I got my first summer job working at the Presidio hospital doing clerical work, and was surprised when my paycheck did not fall on the first or fifteenth of the month, the dates welfare checks came.

I was fed up with the projects, and desperately wanted out. I hated living in fear of my neighbors, in fear of the men when coming home late at night, fearing the sound of helicopters. I hated being so far removed from the central areas of San Francisco. It took me an hour on the bus to get downtown. Cabs would refuse to bring me all the way home, letting me off where the homes ended and Sunnydale began. I decided that I would explore San Francisco on my own and slowly move out of the projects.

Once, when I was sixteen, I rode the buses until I was lost. I knew that I had to learn the city better if I were going to move outside of my racially segregated environment. I got off at a random stop and went into a cafe to get something to drink.

When I opened the door I was surprised and a bit frightened by what I saw: mostly white people eating and drinking coffee. Prior to opening the door I had never been in a predominantly white environment; I had actually only seen white people on television. I remember feeling awkward, looking at the white boy with piercings behind the counter and at the menu of drinks I couldn't pronounce. If I could successfully order a drink in this place, I thought, I could function outside of Sunnydale, since anything outside of Sunnydale was most likely to be white. I slowly walked up to the counter and mumbled that I wanted a cafe au lait, hoping I pronounced it right. He turned about and made my drink. I decided to drink inside the cafe and observe my surroundings. Most of my neighbors would have felt inferior or scared, and so they stayed where they were most comfortable and accepted—the ghetto.

I was reminded of how Blacks in my area feared white people, even though they would never admit it. I went to a Nirvana concert in the early nineties, at a venue near Sunnydale, the Cow Palace. I remember thinking that it was one of the rare times something was actually near us—usually we had to go far from our neighborhood to see a show or access services. Old Black men normally hung in front of neighborhood liquor stores until the wee hours of the morning, but on the evening of the Nirvana concert, mobs of white kids from the suburbs dominated their turf. Instead of the Black men being at their usual spots, these teenage white boys had taken it. It was the first time I actually wanted to see those Black men in front of the liquor store, claiming their space in the face of whiteness.

Escape from the Swamp

I moved out of the projects during my junior year at San Francisco State University, at the age of twenty-two. My longtime friend Jennifer, a white girl from a working-class background, became my housing hook-up. This is usually how people of color avoid racism and find housing. She used to live with a friend of ours near Golden Gate Park, and when she moved out she gave me her room. The rent was only two hundred dollars, but I remember thinking it was a lot of money to save each month. My mother only paid \$160 for our unit in the projects, and she was getting government aid. I was scared to move, but took the challenge.

The day I moved out my mother was hurt; though she wanted me to succeed, she didn't want me to leave her. Once she'd even asked me if I was going to get a unit next door. I remember rolling my eyes and sighing, I'd rather die than live here another day. No one really moved out of Sunnydale, which is why my leaving was such a big deal. Most people move within Sunnydale, or to another housing project. I was doing something most people in Sunnydale could only dream of doing: moving into a nice, safe neighborhood outside of the projects.

Later I moved into another area, also through Jennifer, and lived with a white woman named Mary. While the (mainly white) people that I met in

this new-world college neighborhood were nice to me, it was obvious to me that they didn't know many people of color, and the ones they did know were the very best of the best, the cream of the crop—not the average person of color. I call this the Super Nigger Syndrome—in order for a Black person to have decent housing, health care, etc., he or she must perform way above normal standards (standards not set for white people). Blacks, non-Black people of color, and whites have all asked me if I am mixed, or even from this country, because I don't act "ghetto."

Reflections on Sunnydale

Four years ago, after my mother died, I returned to Sunnydale, visiting from New York City where I now attend grad school. I am amazed at how trapped I still feel anytime I spend time there. The projects are more than a physical location, they're also a state of mind, and the experience stays with you long after you leave them. Even now, whenever I hear a loud noise, I startle, thinking it's a gunshot. I went back with my friend Jennifer and visited the family that now lives where my mother and I used to live: a grandmother, mother, and daughter. The mother actually remembered my mother and me from when I was little. I was surprised at how different their place looks from when we used to live there. She told me I could visit anytime. After chatting with them, I left, knowing I would not be back.

On my visit I recognized a woman I had gone to middle school with, repeating the pattern of many women there—welfare, living in the projects. I spoke with her, but we didn't have much to say. I learned that a childhood friend of mine had been murdered in a shootout. During that visit I felt that Sunnydale could be anywhere in the United States, in any Third World country; it will never be seen on any postcard from San Francisco, and remains unseen by the elite within the city. I left Sunnydale that day feeling grateful that I was able to escape from the prison I called home for twenty-three years.

GHETTO FABULOUS

Tina Fakhridd-Deen

Buying a house in the hood was a sociopolitical decision for me and my husband. I didn't want us to be the type of Black folks who get a little money and flee to the suburbs, away from our people. I live in Chicago. I was born on the west side of one of the most segregated cities in the nation, in the Jane Addams projects, a place commonly referred to as "the ghetto." It was a few miles west of downtown and close to everything imaginable—a prime location.

My family was poor, but resilient. We were no strangers to food stamps, roaches, and hallways that smelled of urine. We often had to eat those black-and-white-labeled generic brands and drink powdered milk, which I despised. I learned early on that sugar on a slice of bread or mixed with a glass of water made a tasty afternoon snack when peanut butter and jelly or Kool-Aid were unavailable.

I am proud of my roots and my complex identity, so it makes me sick when I hear people speak negatively about the ghetto, the place that I called home for many years. It is common to hear white and Black middle-class teens, in a skewed attempt to embrace hip-hop culture, say offensive things like, "Oh, my God, he is acting so ghetto," or, "Look at my big ghetto booty." Although the word "ghetto" refers to a section of the city densely populated by a certain minority group and was formerly where all Jewish

people were dumped in some Eastern European countries (and later in Chicago and other big American cities as well), the term is used quite differently now.

To those on the outside looking in, the term "ghetto" is now synonymous with being Black, dirty, attitudinal, ignorant, lazy, uneducated, and dangerous; it has taken on the same connotations that the term "nigger" historically has had. However different, they are both politically loaded terms used to denigrate poor Blacks, but to acknowledge that would be politically incorrect. "Ghetto" is the new code word for "low-income Black person." Whites won't acknowledge it because it feels too close to being racist, and middle-class Blacks won't acknowledge it because in their hearts, they know that using the word is a sad attempt to distance themselves from the lower class, to assimilate and be accepted by mainstream culture. It would be a public admission that poor Blacks are reduced to frightening caricatures, misunderstood by the majority of American society, still overtly oppressed.

I am ghetto. I love hip-hop, Ice Cube, and the Geto Boys. I have a big butt and snap my neck back and forth when I'm cussing someone out. I look good in cornrows and wild afros. I can do the "booty" dances with the best of them and I still say "ain't" to get my point across. I also have good parents, who always encouraged me to be the best and to speak my mind. As a result, I have a master's degree in education. No, my mama is not on welfare and yes, my father was present while I was growing up. I've never committed a crime, unless you count the time I stole a piece of bubble gum from 7-Eleven and returned it two minutes later out of guilt. I have a beautiful husband, not a "baby daddy." I've traveled to at least six different countries, studied abroad, and wear "ethnic" thrift-store dresses to work. I plan to teach our child Spanish and sign language. My ghetto identity is more than the latest booty-shake video, it is my foundation, and it reverberates through every facet of me—textured and rich. And no, I am not the exception.

My old neighborhood was ghetto. The scent of month-old chicken grease filled most homes, and stained blinds hung in the place of flowery curtains. There were scattered winos on the sidewalks, glass shards on the

playground instead of wood chips, rampant petty crime, graffiti on the walls, and boarded-up windows on some apartments. There were also community centers where we could go and play board games and get juice and a "choke" sandwich (so damn dry you could choke eating them) until our parents got home. Hard-working parents worked several jobs to make ends meet and to provide a good, loving home for their families.

In school, we had spelling bees and learned Spanish in kindergarten. Caring adults with knowing eyes watched over us if our parents weren't around. We all knew each other's names and who to call when a child got out of line in the street. We were a community. My friends were ghetto. We did ghetto things, like drinking buttermilk with cookies and mixing Kool-Aid with sugar, giggling at the sour-sweet taste in our red-stained mouths. We played double dutch with a long extension cord while singing "Take a peach, take a plum." Each time the jump rope hit one of us in the face, we had bitter fistfights, wind-milling with our eyes closed, hoping to make contact. At Halloween, we got yelled at or whipped for throwing eggs, not because it was childish and rude, but because we were screwing with the food supply. Some of us grew up to be construction workers, accountants, and teachers, while others became gang affiliates, hood rats, and drug dealers. Some moved out of the projects; some remain to this day. Some went off to college; others went off to prison. Regardless, we all shared the same history, cried the same tears, and mirrored the same struggle—withstanding poverty.

My family moved away from the projects when I was about six. We lived in the suburbs and then down South for a brief stint, but moved back to an urban area on the North Side of Chicago marked by many of the same characteristics as my former ghetto. Basically, we were still poor and struggling to survive. Upon returning to Chicago from college, I searched the city for housing. I drove back to my old neighborhood and, to my chagrin, found most of it had been torn down—shiny new town homes with skater boys stood in its place. It was now called "University Village," because a local university had bought up most of the property. Even the hospital where many of my friends and I were born had disappeared without a trace. It was almost as if we had never existed. It made my blood

boil that all of those poor people had been displaced, and I wondered where they had gone. I blamed middle-class America and greedy developers. I accused the mayor and his cronies of turning a blind eye to what was happening in poor communities like mine.

I wanted to live in a place where all socioeconomic backgrounds were represented, no one above the other. I finally decided to move back to the North Side, for the diversity in ethnicities, cultures, and economic status. The local fruit market sold everything from *kinchi* and plantains to yuca and collard greens. *Eloze* carts rolled down the street with hot ears of corn as often as ice cream trucks. Blue-collar and white-collar workers rode the el train together each morning. There were little coffee shops on several corners, adorned near the entrances by the occasional evening prostitute or homeless man. In my building lived a Jamaican drug dealer who often threw wild parties with the scent of cheeba oozing under the door; an alcoholic white man and his six-foot grocery cart-toting girlfriend, who fought like Ali and Frazier in a title bout; a spiritual Black vegetarian who swore that a cat's purr meant that it was going to attack her; a wiry ballerina who rented out her place every other month; some Eastern Europeans who spoke little English and managed the building; me and my mathematician husband; and an interracial couple who just seemed shady.

Slowly, many of the buildings in our area were converted to condos, the asking prices beyond ridiculous. The poor were being forced to move out, just like in my old neighborhood. They left a few Section Eight homes intact, for nostalgia's sake. Although gentrification came rapidly to our neighborhood, we weren't directly impacted until my mother (who lived down the street from us) was forced to move out of her tiny one-bedroom apartment when her rent jumped from \$475 to \$1,250 a month. Then our building changed hands, and the new owner threatened to almost double the rent for our modest one-bedroom. We all needed to move, and fast. My mother purchased her first home on the far South Side. Loving the diversity of the North Side, my husband and I tried to find another local property to purchase, but the price hikes were happening everywhere. We considered the suburbs, but quickly came back to reality. Why buy into the

reverse white flight and allow upper-class whites to move back into the comforts and convenience of the city while we got stuck out in the boondocks, disconnected from everything we knew? So we did the most intelligent thing we could think of, we invested in Bronzeville, a historic South Side community.

During the great migration of the early 1900s, many Blacks emigrated from the South in hopes of landing industrial jobs in Chicago. Bronzeville was one of the only areas of the city that southern Blacks were allowed to live in. It is legendary for its sizzling-hot blues scene and notorious 47th St., a strip of juke joints, jazz cafes, restaurants, and hotels. This is where famous Black artists such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald came to perform and stay when they had a gig in town. For years after its heyday, Bronzeville had been a poverty-stricken area filled with crime, despair, and little development. This was now one of the hot spots in the city to move to, because of its accessibility to downtown and the lakefront, and its affordable housing.

In a matter of days, we found a beautiful three-bedroom condo with a monthly mortgage in the same price bracket as our old apartment's rent increase. Set right on the main boulevard—named after a well-known Black civil rights leader—we could see all types of Black people walking up and down the street. This was the first time that I had been back in an all-Black area since my days in the ghetto and the South. It was exciting and wonderful, although I did miss the ethnic diversity of the North Side. There was a new Black-owned poetry cafe and a bank, and the alderwoman's office was less than a block away. It was rumored that a comedy club, performing arts theater, art gallery, and bookstore were in development on the next corner. Across the street, a sign boasted a new town-home development starting at \$350,000. My husband and I thought that our neighbors were fabulous and incredibly nice. We had two lesbian pastors across the hall, three outgoing drug dealers, otherwise known as "pharmaceutical representatives," two PhD's, an ex-cop, a lawyer, and several high-powered businesswomen. We were all so close that it was like living in the dorms again.

I soon realized that I had somehow crossed over and was officially middle class. It was confusing, because I wasn't like the bourgeois Blacks who knew nothing about hard times and mocked the accursed lot of poor folks. I was different. I cared about civil rights for everyone. I didn't turn my nose up at the thought of eating pig feet or chitlins. I didn't fear that my property value would go down because poor folks lived next door. And I didn't refer to all less fortunate people, especially the expressive or thugish-looking ones, as "ghetto." Then my whole reality changed. Within a week of our moving in to our new building there were two attempted robberies. I was four months pregnant and actually heard them kicking in my neighbor's door. A few weeks later, someone's car was broken into; then more robbery attempts in the coming months. I began to fear coming home late in the evening. As a pregnant woman in her third trimester, I was truly defenseless. My mind began betraying me. I questioned whether this neighborhood was good enough—safe enough—for me and my family. I feared the possibility of my child picking up broken crack vials in the neighborhood park during our afternoon strolls. I thought about sending our daughter to the substandard neighborhood schools. I thought about someone actually getting into our home, violating us and everything we've worked so hard for. I thought about moving—moving far away from crime, far away from my present reality, and even farther away from the ghetto we now lived in. It no longer felt like home—it felt like prison. It felt dangerous. It felt unforgiving. I felt like I was being punished for leaving the hood and coming back with a pot to piss in. I saw jealous eyes oggle me as I entered our six-foot gate, making sure it slammed behind me. I became resentful, fighting rage. I felt like a traitor.

I had become that middle-class asshole who moves in and pushes aside the poor residents, who are rightfully angry. They wanted the good life too. They wanted big-screen TVs and Jacuzzi's like us. They wanted to feel important and respected, as we did. They also craved quality community resources for their families. No matter how I tried to frame it, I had become one of the powerful pawns in this gentrification game, with the poorest of Bronzeville being knocked clear off the board. Like magic, with our middle-class presence, the schools would begin to get better, more

commercial development would find its way to the area, and politicians and policemen would make special visits to our condo association meetings to hear our concerns. We would complain about the crime and beg for the removal of it, of "them." My sensitivity for the wretched poor would wear thin. Ill feelings would grow between us and "them" until someone gave in and moved on. There could be no coexistence between the classes. We misunderstood and distrusted each other too much. There could be no community here.

Not until we stop to realize that we're all in this together. Not until I use my newfound middle-class power to advocate for the right to decent and affordable living for my new neighbors, here in Bronzeville. Not until I help them to advocate for themselves. Not until I realize that some of these residents don't want or need our middle-class handouts because they were doing just fine before we got here. Not until I understand that many of these families are just like mine was back in the day, working hard and trying to keep food on the table. Not until I treat them as equals. Not until I stop being scared and open my mouth to say "hello" to the skeptical faces that eye me daily. Not until I recognize that the ones trying to rob us are just lost souls with no hope or heart left (that doesn't mean I won't keep calling the cops). Not until I get the resentment out of my heart.

The ghetto is a community filled with ups and downs, struggles and survivors and people sticking around hoping that things will get better. Being ghetto is so much more than a new catchphrase or a hip-hop song; it's an identity, a reflection of our economy, and a way of life. Just as hip-hop will be in my blood and spirit forever, so will the ghetto. I will transcend the box that us ghetto folks have been put into and create a new space. I will make people think before using the term "ghetto" to refer to any person, place, or thing. I will fight for the right to be ghetto, even when my back's against the wall, being violated by those I'm trying to stand up for. That's keeping it real—real ghetto. As a people, when one of us suffers, we all suffer. In my heart, I know that we ain't a true community until we take an honest look at each other and begin to embrace every part of our intricately woven culture. Black folks must get a handle on the crabs-in-a-barrel syndrome, and learn to stand strong, together.