

A SPACE BETWEEN THE BEADS

By Kimberly K. Farrar

In the essay A Space Between the Beads by Kimberly K Farrar, a New York City high school teacher has a conversation with an ex-Latin Kings member who defies stereotyping. She offers to listen to his story with the hope that "it would do him some good," and is then filled with conflicting emotions herself. Ultimately, she is left stunned by the dichotomy of killer/child sitting before her.

The students were attending an assembly and I was alone in my room when Junior* came by with a rewrite of his essay. He wanted me to grade it right then. The topic was to describe a favorite object, one of my standard lessons, and he'd chosen to write about a necklace given to him by his older brother. It was a strand of gold and black beads that had been passed to his brother by Lord Tito, a high-ranking leader of the notorious gang The Latin Kings. There was a section in the initial draft of Junior's essay that wasn't clear to me, something about marking the beads after a member dies. He pulled out a purple velvet pouch, the type of purse that looks as though it once held a valuable coin, and unfurled the necklace as if it were a rosary.

He showed me a space between the beads where the string had been marked with a black pen. "You see? That's for a member who died. There's another one, and this space is for me."

There was a small bit of exposed string waiting for the black line of Junior's death. I wondered about how a life could be reduced to a black mark. His essay explained that the beads were protective and blessed. After Lord Tito had given the necklace to Junior's brother, Lord Tito was found murdered. Junior emphasized that this had convinced his brother of the beads' power. The morning after his brother had passed on the strand to him, his brother was found murdered.

"Don't give those beads away," I joked.

"You have to, every ten years, or they don't work for you."

*all names are pseudonyms

I pulled out my red pen to correct and grade his essay. Junior, a heavy kid who wore pressed blue jeans and striped oxford shirts, sat across from me in the small schoolroom chair, leaning forward like an anxious child. His lips were stretched thin across his broad face as he awaited my final grade. I made a few grammatical corrections, complimented him on clearing up the vague section about marking the strand, and gave it a 90. Maybe it should have been an 85, but I sensed the importance of the essay to him. Junior was one of my brightest students. The precise, well-constructed letters of his printing reflected a disciplined mind. He had had a four-year scholarship to one of the finest private high schools in New York until midway through the eleventh grade when he was arrested and the scholarship was rescinded. Now he was nineteen years old and trying to graduate from the evening program at the Young Adult Learning Program, a last chance, last hope kind of place.

I was curious about the beads, about Junior, so I asked a benign question about the alternating pattern of the beads, five black, then five gold. He explained that the memorial marks on the strand have to go where the gold and black beads meet.

"There are 360 beads for the original 360 laws of discipline," he said, as if everyone knew about the 360 laws of discipline. "The necklace represents the 360 degrees of the completed circle." This I understood. It seemed philosophical, even New Age compared to what was to follow.



"You know, I've wondered what happened with you, Junior. How a kid with a full scholarship to a private school ended up," I looked around at the crumbling ceiling and empty bookshelf, "here."

"I did real good at my old school. Nobody bothered me and I didn't bother nobody, but the Feds had already been following me two years when I was there."

He wanted to talk and I didn't want to go to the pointless assembly, so I put down my folder, thinking that maybe listening to him would do him some good.

When the Feds arrested him, there was one document that charged 137 gang members under the racketeering and organized crime laws. Junior told the DA that he was going to fight it because he knew that a good lawyer could dismantle a federal case. So his girlfriend's family mortgaged their home and his father emptied his savings account to scrounge up the \$75,000 needed to get Junior out of jail to await trial.

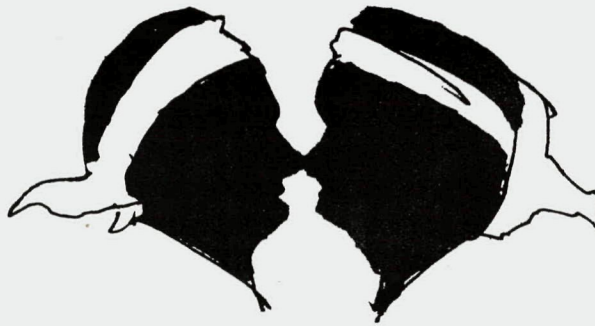
"So the DA calls me one day and they send two marshals out to my house to take me downtown. There's one thing I got to say about the Feds: they treat you with the utmost respect. It's Mr. Sanchoero this and Mr. Sanchoero that. Not like these dog city cops. They had the best food, too. Before they questioned me, I ate three big sandwiches. Hero sandwiches. You gotta understand, I was on house arrest for three months. It was the first time I'd stepped foot out of the house."

They wanted Junior to give testimony against his leader in exchange for leniency, but Junior swore he wasn't going to snitch. Then the DA carted out the 16 folders of testimony from his 16 compadres in the gang, and his stomach turned. "I literally felt sick after reading the first four," Junior said, gripping his stomach.

"It's like a tribe," he explained. "There's five guys in charge of each borough, and under them there's another group that runs the streets. That was me. I re-

ported directly to the heads. I wasn't going to say nothing, no way. I'm no snitch. These were my people." In a gesture of loyalty, he pounded his heart with his fist.

His eyes filled with tears. As if those "traitors" were in the room, he erupted, "You didn't have a coat and I gave you a coat. When your baby was hungry, I put food in your baby's mouth. And now you're going to snitch me out?" His face turned red and his eyes almost closed. "It hurt me. I did everything for these guys. So I saw what these bastards, excuse me, were going to do and I told the DA 'all right.' It wasn't



about honor anymore. It was about saving your own." It reminded me of how animals will turn on their own kind when threatened.

They had followed him for two and a half years. He had an uncle on the police force who betrayed him. Disloyalty to the family was one crime Junior could not comprehend.

"I told him, 'You're family. You're supposed to protect me.' He went on about how I knew what I was doing was wrong. But he was family."

His words, *protect me*, rang in my ears. He was just a kid at the time, sixteen years old, fourteen when he was initiated.

Junior thrust his pointed finger forward as if his uncle's face were right in front of him, "You ain't family, man, you are a traitor." Then he took a breath, "No one in my family speaks to him anymore. Not even my father."

When Junior was sixteen, he had two hundred "soldiers" at his beck and call. "That's power," he said with pride. "Corrupt power, but still power." In a different life he would have been class president.

His leader had sent him to Harlem to shoot a guy who had tried to rape a Hispanic woman. Junior explained that "jobs" were always done by members from a different borough to keep the cops off the trail. I wondered how he knew whom to kill, how he tracked down the would-be rapist. I remembered my old student, Tyrone, from years ago at a different alternative school. He was found chopped up in a garbage can and the police were certain it was a case of mistaken identity. Tyrone was one of my favorite students, quiet and sweet, and I always allowed him to sit alone at the back of the room peacefully writing his own thoughts in his notebook. My memory of Tyrone's murder collided with the idea of Junior prowling Harlem to kill a man whom he had never seen before.

When Junior returned to Brooklyn from Harlem, he had to hand the leader the gun and tell in detail how it "went down." This was to ensure that they had their story straight if there were ever a trial. But I thought this ritual of recounting was more an act of hardening one's conscience. One of his leaders was an undercover FBI agent who had recorded Junior's entire recollection. Junior was quick to inform me that audio-tapes are not admissible as evidence in court. This was part of the reason he was never charged with the murder. He had a much clearer understanding of the intricacies of the law than I did. Junior had been confident that he would win his case with the help of a skilled lawyer. But after the DA displayed the cartons of evidence they'd collected against him, Junior reconsidered.

"For two and a half years, I sat in a two-by-four cell, twenty-three hours a day. One hour a day for exercise."

I found myself wondering if he had gained his weight in prison.

"I read a lot," he said and laughed. "But they don't reform you. You come out different, angrier. People don't understand. Somebody said I should see a psychiatrist."

LATIN KINGS

"You should." I explained my own experiences with therapy. "It will help you deal with your feelings. You'll get your anger out. It's right under the surface anyway and you don't want it to get you in trouble again, you know what I mean?"

He explained that he was trying to "process" what I'd said and see if it applied to him. He came to the conclusion that it didn't. I knew he was right. My immediate problem was that I had no idea how to convince a person who had been in jail, who had murdered someone, to go sit on a leather couch and talk about his feelings. It seemed ridiculous to me, too.

Junior made a point of distinguishing the Latin Kings from the Bloods. He explained his disdain for the Bloods' initiation ritual of slashing an innocent bystander across the face as compared to the Kings who just "beat you in." He didn't want any Bloods in his neighborhood.

"I saw this one Blood around my way and I said, 'Take your red bandana off and get out of my neighborhood. If I ever see you again, I'm going to slit your throat ear to ear.' And then not even a week later this...this punk shows up again. You know what a straight edge is? It's one of those old shaving blades. I got a real nice one. It's

real sharp with a pearl handle.” His eyes gleamed at the thought of its beauty.

“So I see this punk, right in my neighborhood again, and I told my man, ‘Go to my house and get my straight edge, but take your time.’ I wanted to talk with this guy. You know, draw it out.” Draw it out? A dark-eyed, remorseless murderer was sitting across from me.

“So my man comes back about a half hour later and I flip it open...”

“Stop. I don’t want to know,” I said. “Don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Okay. Let’s just say I never saw him again after that and neither did anybody else.”

There was Junior spilling over the tiny desk: smart, angry, young, and entirely capable of killing me. I thought about my daughter and my middle-class life. I wanted to be home at my dining room table, thumbing through the Eddie Bauer catalogue.

“I can’t sleep at night for the things I’ve done,” Junior said. “It’s true. I lay awake all night sometimes. It’s like my eyes can’t shut.”

He looked out the window at the darkening sky and continued, “You know what I want? It’s not forgiveness. It’s too late for forgiveness.”

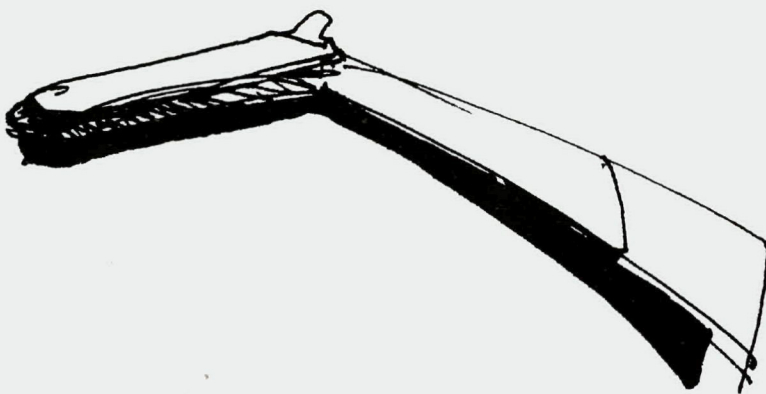
“Maybe too soon.”

“No, it’s too late. I go to church now. I found a way to God. In a way I wish I hadn’t. But all I want is just a little bit of mercy,” and he pinched his fingers together.

I wondered if he had offered any mercy to the man in Harlem or the punk in the bandana. Then I winced at my own eye-for-an-eye attitude.

“If I’m going to burn in hell for eternity, and I am, just a little mercy before I go. That’s all I ask.”

In front of me sat a murderer who understood his fate and a kid who wanted a good grade on his essay. The bored history teacher from across the hall came moseying into the room, plopped down and asked, “So what are we talking about?” I didn’t know how to answer him. □



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