

2 a.m. **West** Humboldt Park

By **Doug** Van Hooser

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A day in the night of American gun culture. In this palpable noir as improv a cop and a youth astray in gang territory connect and disconnect through the device of internal monologue. We like the way emotional trajectories are used to create atmosphere rather than the usual descriptive prose and the edgy, kinetic platform it provides for authentic voice. Read it twice to get the full impact. We did. (Spacing and format is author's own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language):*

“Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You’ve got to have a reason for being out here.”

“I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yea, man, you heard me. I fell asleep.”

“Was she worth it?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothin’, kid. Why didn’t you just stay where you were?”

2 A.M. West Humboldt Park

Hustle, boy. Keep movin’. Nothin’ good happens this time of night.

No. Tell me I’m not seeing what I am seeing.

The streets get you. Keep an eye out. Any car could be it.

He’s a nervous one. Keeps lookin’ over his shoulder.

Gotta get home. Gotta get off the street.

Looking for me. Looking for blue. The color he hates. Or a gang-banger bullet.

Damn. You know better. Streets belong to bullets and fools. How stupid can I be?

It's a kid. What's he up to? Why does he have one hand in his pocket?

End up in a pool of blood or put in bracelets and carted off by the man. Damn, you fool.

Why a hoodie? It's fuggin' August. Looking over his shoulder again.

Four blocks. Keep movin'. Uh-oh. A car, SUV, creepin'. Just creepin'.

He's up to something. But what?

Run? No. Keep movin'. Four blocks. Just four blocks.

A neighborhood kid would know it's dangerous. Wouldn't be out here.

He a watchin', watchin' me. Whoever he is.

He must not belong. I pick up speed he's going to run.

I know you there. I run now you catch me. Can't outrun a car. Can't outrun a bullet.

He knows I'm here. Should I call for back-up?

You see me. Deciding do you come for me? Makin' up your mind. Why you hesitatin'?

Circle the block. Make him think I've left, come around from the other direction, let him come to me.

You not lost. You huntin'. I'm what you huntin'. I'm the trophy. You not puttin' me on your wall.

Maybe he's on his way home. Maybe he'll pop into one of these houses.

Damn. Where'd he go?

Maybe he was bangin' his girl. Just a dumb kid who had to have some pussy.

Can't believe I fell asleep. Now I'm on the street. Only the man and gun totin' fools out here.

He'll be home safe and sound when I circle around.

Target practice. That's all I am out here. A bullseye.

Be gone kid. Be home. Be safe. Don't make me decide.

You didn't disappear. You playin' a game.

Can't ignore you. Have to stop you. Make sure you're harmless.

I'm the guy you gotta get in your sights. A video game. I'm the one you wanna pop.

If you run, then what? Chase you? Don't make me do that.

I know you comin' for me.

Be gone, kid, be gone. Don't make me stop you.

Two A. M. You comin' for me. I feel it.

You don't want it. I don't want it.

Three blocks. Where you at?

No no no no, kid. Get into a house. Don't make me do this.

Is that him? SUV sittin' there? Just waitin'?

Half a block. Only half a block. Then I have to make sure why you're out here.

Betcha that's him. Sittin' in the dark. Put the fox move on me.

Are you just a dumb kid or Mr. Gangbang?

Don't turn your back. Be ready.

Do you have a gun? Crap. Do I call for back-up?

Could be the man or a Gangsta. Both got a gun and an itchy finger.

Damn, kid, disappear. Turn into that house.

He's movin'.

Got to do it. Call it in. "Officer requesting back-up, nine hundred North Karlov."

That a cop?

Don't you run, dammit. Put on the headlights. Blind him.

Whoa! What's with the bright lights? Do I run?

Don't you run. Don't make this a chase.

Damn them lights. Can't see shit. That a cop trick. Gang banger shoot first.

Please kid, don't have a gun.

What you want? I'm doin' nothin'!

Not running, thank god.

Cops gotta mess with ya. Why you gotta mess with me?

Both hands. No gun.

What you want? Dim them lights asshole!

Make sure he knows you're a cop. Move slowly.

Go fuck with someone else. Let me be. I'm doin' nothin'!

Don't let him trick you. Watch his hands. Roll the window.

"Why you out here, kid? It's 2 A.M."

"I'm walkin'."

"Yea. Where?"

"Home. Where else would I be goin'?"

"Nothing good happens on these streets this time of night. You must know that."

"I'm no fool."

"Yea, you are. Otherwise you wouldn't be out here."

"I'm not doin' nothin' to no one."

"O.K. But this is gang turf. Shoot first."

"I know that."

“I don’t get it. You know better but here you are.”

“I screwed up.”

“Screwed up what?”

“Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You’ve got to have a reason for being out here.”

“I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yea, man, you heard me. I fell asleep.”

“Was she worth it?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothin’, kid. Why didn’t you just stay where you were?”

“I... I couldn’t.”

“So it was a girl.”

“None of your business.”

“All right. All right. I guess it doesn’t matter. But better you stay with the bimbo and stay alive then come out here.”

“She’s no bimbo and if you did your job this wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Really, kid? What do you think I’m trying to do out here?”

“Messin’ with me.”

“If I was messin’ with you, you’d be in cuffs sitting in the back seat.”

“I’m doin’ nothin’.”

“Yea, yea. Just out here looking for a bullet. Where’s your home?”

“Two blocks straight up.”

“I’m going to turn around and follow you. Make sure you get there. Don’t run. You’ll regret it.”

“Did I run from you?”

“No. That was smart. Be smart again.”

“I’m no dummy.”

“From now on get home before dark and sleep there. Don’t start walking until I get turned around.”

Com’on, you blue devil. Get that car turned around. Don’t run. What the fuck you take me for? This is stupid but I’m not dumb.

I fell asleep so I’m out here on the street. Go figure. Knows better and here he is. Unbelievable.

I shoulda stayed with Monica. Snuck out in the morning. Now I got some dumb cop followin’ me like I’m a six-year old. Playin’ like he’s a good guy. We both know better. Don’t we.

Do your job. God, the attitude. Where’s it come from? I’m trying to keep you safe and what do I get? Guff. All right, kid, start walking.

Man, this is like bein’ in a spotlight. Hey! I ain’t some movie star. Back off! Give a guy some breathin’ room.

Just a kid being stupid. The kid doesn’t run, doesn’t pull a weapon, just gives you some guff. That’s a win.

One more block, just one more. Maybe that cop’s not so bad. Maybe he does give a shit.

All right, kid, almost there. This wasn’t so bad was it?

Can’t believe it. Actually a blue uniform that asks questions first. Don’t think the worst. Gotta be a first.

You get home safe and sound, and I don’t even get out of the car. All’s well that ends well. The way it should be.

Whoa! What the fuck is that?! Man, that better not be.

Whoa, what’s that? No... that can’t be.

Mother fucker! You set me up! You blue bastard!

The back-up, you idiot. Fuck, I forgot about them.

Shit! Two of 'em. Guns.

Get out of the car before he runs.

They gonna shoot me!

Dammit, leave the kid alone!

God-damn police.

“Back off! He’s all right”

All a set up. I did nothin’! Run, boy, run. They gonna shoot you. Run like you never run before!

Fuck! He’s running. “Put down your weapons! He’s harmless! Don’t shoot!”

He’s shoutin’. Run, mother fucker, run!

WACK! WACK! WACK! Shots ring and reverberate through the neighborhood.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *In 2020, there have been 4,115 shootings and 768 homicides in Chicago. West Humboldt Park is a neighborhood on Chicago’s west side where many shootings occur. The relationship between the police and the residents, teeters on hostile. Many of the victims are innocent bystanders and in a number of cases stray bullets find people sitting in their home minding their own business. “2 A.M. West Humboldt Park” derives from these simple facts. In order to make the story more dramatic I decided to portray a young man and a police officer by what was running through their minds at 2 A.M. instead of a normal literary narrative*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Doug Van Hooser’s fiction has appeared in Red Earth Review, Light and Dark, The Riding Light Review, Flash Fiction Magazine and Bending Genres Journal. His poetry can be found in Chariton Review, Poetry Quarterly, and Split Rock Review among other publications. Doug’s plays have received readings at Chicago Dramatist Theatre and Three Cat Productions. More at dougvanhooser.com.

