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Introduction

In the early evening of the 23rd of January, 2004, a fourteen-year-old African American girl named Jahkema Princess Hansen was shot to death, at very close range, inside a town house in a Washington, D.C. apartment complex known as Sursum Corda. The murder attracted media attention – far more so than another murder, committed soon after, of a seventeen-year-old boy in a city high school – and for several days thereafter the *Washington Post* pursued Princess' murder, reporting both on its circumstances and soon thereafter on the community of Sursum Corda itself. The facts of the murder were at once simple and gruesome. Fourteen years old and only recently arrived in the community, Princess had acquired a boyfriend several years older than herself, or so the story ran, one who, since he was involved in the drug trade, could entertain her as he liked. That entertainment ended on the day she saw him shoot and kill a competitor. Being fourteen, she was without fear, and told her friends what she had seen, though in the closed world of Sursum Corda it was not long before the police (and others) found out as well. Directed by them, according to this report, her mother brought her daughter to a police station some distance from Sursum Corda (the point is important because another report suggests that the police had visited her at home, thus indicating her vulnerability). Once at the station they asked Princess to bear witness as to what she had seen. Anticipating the refusal to speak that she at once produced, the police offered to protect her anyway, only to be told, it is said, "I'm fourteen and can look after myself." "But really you can't," they insisted. "Your boyfriend is going to believe that he has a choice between spending 60 years in prison or shooting

you. He's going to shoot you." Meeting a refusal still, they turned to her mother: "She's a minor," they pointed out. "If you permit it, we can protect her anyway." "Leave my daughter alone," came the reported reply.

Back at Sursum Corda things did not improve. Princess, or someone close to her, reported a version of the conversation at the police station to her boyfriend or to one of his crew, with the result that Princess came to believe that she was going to be remunerated for her faithfulness. Her mother subsequently denied any knowledge of what her daughter had been told. How could I know it?, she asked. But if there was a threat involved as well, neither Princess nor her mother understood it. In the end a friend of her boyfriend came to her, but not with the reward she was expecting.

Or at least such was the account we allowed ourselves to believe soon after the crime. But there is another perspective to pursue, one that began to emerge during the 2006 trial, and was reported both in the *Washington Post* and in Jonathan York's article in the October 13, 2006 issue of Washington's free *City Paper*, my source for the details that now follow. Suddenly it is January, 2004 again, and Princess Hansen, aged 14, and a friend with whom she was living, Timika Holiday, aged 18, returned from a go-go bar to a nearby apartment complex called Temple Courts in order to see what was going on, what could be had, and for how much. There Mario Evans had set up shop by the door to the stairs on the sixth floor, selling dippers – cigarettes, sold singly, but dipped in a bottle of PCP when the customer produced twenty dollars. The girls stood by and watched.

Marquette Ward came in, stocky, dressed in black and with some members of his crew, but he wanted a half-price deal, a dipper for ten dollars, not twenty. He had a bundle of greenbacks with him, and knowing that he could pay full price, Evans said No, disrespecting him in front of his friends, probably a mistake, though with so many people present it might have ended there. The cause for subsequent events was never entirely clear to the participants, nor was it inevitable. But salient points came out at the trial, more than a year and a half later, and these suggest some of the reasons for what followed. Evans' refusal of a discount put Ward in a bind: he could not back down and play poor without losing face in front

of his friends, including the two girls. He had slept with both of them, and it is possible that their presence as witnesses may have encouraged him not to haggle, just as it encouraged Evans to hold out for the full twenty dollars. On the other hand, when Ward paid up then Evans had won, and worse still, he had treated Ward like a cheap mug, not like a friendly equal. Choosing the simpler course, Ward paid the twenty dollars and left down the stairway with his friends, though no doubt their conversation continued, probably to Evans' detriment.

Back on the sixth floor, things got no better. Bernard Smith, already present together with the girls, came forward. He also wanted a half-price dipper, and Evans again refused. But now all accommodation had been thrust aside, and nothing was as it should be. Smith drew his gun to gain respect and power. Knowing his man, Evans didn't believe that he would use it, and stood his ground. Words followed. Then the stairway door suddenly opened again and Ward reappeared, gun in hand. The girls retreated, leaving the men to do their worst. Ward and Smith fired almost at once. Mario Evans died where he fell.

But this was a murder that could be solved. There were too many people involved in it, and the police caught up with the confused and frightened girls in the Temple Courts lobby soon after. They had seen everything. And everybody knew they had.

Initially, Ward may have thought that he could ignore the threat the girls posed, perhaps because he knew them so very well. Holiday he had paid (a point for the defense at the trial): but even so, he called her with a warning and a threat. But by the next week things hadn't settled down at all, and the police, who were actively pursuing an investigation, soon knew what had happened. Not long thereafter Princess ran into Bernard Smith again, who let her see his gun and warned her to keep her mouth shut. Taken to the police station with her mother, she remembered his admonition. It was there that, explaining her naive lack of fear, she told the police that she was safe because, "I have the best pussy in Sursum Corda." It sounded as though she was quoting Ward. After her interview she returned to Sursum Corda and called Ward to report her loyalty. He promised her that his friend Frank Thompson would bring her and Holiday some money, and she was naively delighted. Holiday knew better.

But then Frank Thompson ran into both of the girls on the street. Looking directly at Princess, he warned her that she had better not tell anything to anybody, but as he spoke he thought that she was too young really to understand what he was saying, and what she had to do. Now Holiday was well and truly frightened. When Princess was late coming home that night she sent her sisters out to look for her, and cooked half-smokes for dinner. Then at last Princess came home and all seemed well. But suddenly Thompson pushed through the front door. He had a ski-mask pulled down over his face, a gun in his hand, and he began shooting as soon as he was inside, in his fear and agitation shooting wildly, so that his bullets sprayed everywhere, striking a bucket, the floor, a chair, the wall, and Holiday's twelve-year-old sister, who was hit in the leg. The older girls, Princess Hansen and Timika Holiday, rushed behind a sofa in the living room to hide, but they were too slow. Frank Thompson stood directly over them and, at point blank range, shot Princess repeatedly until she was dead. He then pointed the gun at Holiday, but it clicked empty. Now without bullets and suddenly terrified, he rushed back through the house and out into the night. This is where my story begins.

Sursum Corda covers 5.8 acres and is separated from the rest of Washington both by roadways and by black metal fences intended to make life difficult for fleeing drug dealers. It is a short distance from Union Station, the main railway station in Washington, and is made up of 199 light brown stone townhouses built in the late 1960's, completed in 1970, a little small by today's standards, though most contain between one and six bedrooms and a living space of between 1200 and 1500 square feet, usually on two floors. These circumstances make the units easy to heat in the winter and, since the units are centrally air conditioned, easy to cool in the summer. Room sizes differ, but many measure about 10 by 8 feet, and are entered through a narrow hallway which runs, often bending at an angle, from the front door. The room in which Princess was trapped with her friend was one of these, and the closeness of the space in which she confronted her murderer only added to the extraordinary viciousness of the crime.

It was hardly the first murder to take place at Sursum Corda,

though in fact the killing of a child is rare. Some years ago a former tutor and I were discussing with two of our young learners what they liked about their community. Aware of the homelessness present about them, both boys indicated that the best thing about Sursum Corda was its houses, and prompted only a little by my colleague, were willing to add the Georgetown tutorial program to the list. Another thing I like about it, one boy said, is that when they shoot people here, they usually don't shoot children.

A fair point, though not entirely true. A few years ago in a complex not far from Sursum Corda, a six-year-old was shot (but not killed) with an automatic handgun in the hands of another boy, aged fifteen. I was alarmed when I heard the story, since it is quite true that there is a taboo against harming children seriously (though a few years earlier a big-for-his-age and aggressive fourteen-year-old had been, with calculation, shot in the leg to teach him not to interfere with drug transactions), and I was concerned that the inhibition might be breaking down. It wasn't, at least not then. The shooter had been aiming at one of his colleagues in the drug trade, but like many such he was a simply terrible shot, the result of little if any target practice. But bad marksmanship is only one of the dangers here. Shortly before I began working at Sursum Corda one killer had inadvertently murdered his intended victim's brother. Two weeks later he returned and finished what he had begun. During the period of violence at Sursum Corda, roughly from the late 1980's to the mid 1990's, most of the executions I heard about had taken place in the small hours, and usually at point blank range.

I have begun my narrative with this recitation of violence because that is what you expect of me. Accounts of violence in inner-city communities, many a good deal less true than the ones I have just told, are legion, and shortly after Princess' murder several newspaper articles sought thus to stigmatize the community, to represent it as a place of drugs, murder, disorder and crime generally, and though interesting enough in its way, nothing that should be encouraged or preserved. The attractiveness of inner-city violence is particularly apparent in print, where it can be regarded from a distance, and isolated from the very many other aspects of urban life which the disadvantaged confront daily: a concern for their children and the rent, an apprehension of standing authority

and of the simple arbitrariness of life which affects all of us, a desire to understand the world, particularly as it registers upon whatever it is that life gives. Violence has a small place too, but one that is diminished by the daily grind. Elsewhere, it is what such places as Sursum Corda, once stigmatized, are known for, and all residents are deemed somehow culpable, if not by active participation than by indirect acquiescence. Usually we look away from the poor, except when they threaten, frighten or entertain us.

But the issue of drugs was a large one in Sursum Corda, and probably I should write about it now. In one of his short stories, James Joyce creates a character who “deals with moral problems the way a cleaver deals with meat,” and it has sometimes seemed to me that he might have been describing many a Sursum Corda critic. But not all of them. The hardest criticism to answer comes from a person of like background who has prospered through intelligence, perseverance, and opportunity, and now looks back at the world left behind, and judges it. Such a one is usually willing to encourage others to follow in his or her footsteps, but that encouragement comes at a price, one involving a certain attitude toward the community left behind. In the worst case, for example Princess’ murder, it would not be impossible to argue that the community was complicit in her death, and this in fact was sometimes done in the days following. Her murder, like many before it, turned on the muted struggle among drug dealers and users, and it is true that the community has not often sought help from the police, a circumstance that has occasioned ill will. Drug dealers, sons of the community or not, are almost never handed over to the authorities, but even so they are generally unwelcome, and made to feel so. At the same time, except perhaps for those who stand to benefit, such persons are not really approved of, and it is uncommon for a mother to watch her young take up with them with equanimity, though it does happen.

No cause for celebration, to be sure. For forty-seven years our little program encouraged children to look beyond the schemata which had been prepared for them, and our chief adversaries were the drug guys. Some years ago Allene, a woman working with our program, saw a boy talking with one such when it was time for tutoring; no question what they were discussing. She walked over

to them and told our young learner that it was time to come inside for tutoring. You make me sick, the other one replied. No I don't, Allene answered, careful not to deny what he had said. It's that white stuff you take that makes you sick. And walked away with her young learner. Another boy was friends with them as well: his grandmother, the only anchor in his life, was much concerned, and he would not reject her love for him, so always came to tutoring on time. But his friends advised him: Pound on the piano. (There was a piano in the room in which we worked.) That way they'll kick you out and it won't be your fault. No question which side we are on.

But in the past it was impossible not to observe the way the community countenanced – from fear, from indifference, from a sense that they are ours – the presence of these dreadful and unwelcome people. Sursum Corda is a short walk from Capitol Hill, and in the nineteenth century a large slave market stood between the two – Frederick Douglass used to cite it when he spoke, forcefully objecting to the sale of persons at the very threshold of the Capitol. Two centuries of slavery, another of neglect, cannot vanish with the stroke of a pen. We hold these truths, as we have come to know them. Try to wrest them from us as you have before, but we will make you use brute force to do so.

I do not wish to romanticize the choices made. Intelligence and perseverance have led some residents away from Sursum Corda – but not all who have left it can lay claim those good qualities. And it is these other ones who give the place its roots and its direction. They live in a world that they themselves have only made in part, yet it bears the impress of their certainties. No plea for the community will move the great ones now, since it was that they set out to escape. Remember the friends you had when you were young, especially those who could not follow you. They are the ones who do not choose you now.

And finally this. A tutor long since graduated kept up with her young learner, and helped him find a place in a private school, known to be sympathetic to such as he, where he could live and find his way in life. When Princess' murder appeared in the press his headmaster made the connection, and invited the young man to speak in chapel about his life at Sursum Corda, and what, thanks

to the school, he had replaced it with. But the headmaster didn't get the thanks he was expecting. Instead, the young man said that *Sursum Corda* was a part of him, that he would not desert it, even now. He didn't praise the murder, but knowing what he did (which was a lot) wouldn't accept that the community was complicit in the crime, and wouldn't desert it (as others had) now that it was vulnerable. To prudence he preferred this truth, this courage. Not long thereafter, and driven by that speech, he left the school, unwilling to forget the rock from which he was hewn.

Sursum Corda was founded on different principles. In the late 1960's an energetic ex-army-officer who was also a devout Catholic, Eugene Stewart, together with certain friends, took the then extraordinary step of making themselves personally responsible for establishing a place where the disadvantaged and the poor could live together with respect and dignity. There is no doubt at all that he was responding to Catholic social teaching when he did so, but the action seemed too almost utopian, a distant echo of those nineteenth-century communes that sprang up in response to a search for a new and better world, places to redeem the human race. It is usual, when referring to the early days of *Sursum Corda*, to point out the federal assistance that proved useful to the early residents, first of all in the person of Robert F. Kennedy, then Senator from New York, who supported ex-officer Stewart and recommended him to HUD, which approved one of the low-interest loans that the federal government had made available to groups and individuals interested in building low and moderate income housing in the city. On the other hand, there are those both inside *Sursum Corda* and outside it who do not regard the dedication of "Northwest 1," as the area is known, to support the urban disadvantaged as an act of civic generosity so much as a somewhat cynical way of containing the poor in one place, so that their presence would not lessen property values elsewhere in the city. Apparently HUD's more recent thinking has moved away from supporting such enclaves, even now sometimes represented as the haunt of criminals, so that present policy emphasizes mixed developments, with a portion of HUD supported developments now set aside for the disadvantaged, rather than seeking to contain them all in one place.

But the difficulties such developments posed seem to have been

understood by those who sought to establish the community, and one of them was a well known Catholic priest, Horace McKenna, a Jesuit, and then a curate at near-by St. Aloysius Gonzaga church on North Capitol Street, whence he had come after his energetic work on behalf of his African-Americans parishioners in the Maryland countryside had made it imperative for him to leave. His connection with the founders was deep if sometimes continuous – McKenna Walk, on the Sursum Corda property, is named for him – but what drew the men together was what I have already alluded to, an understanding of Catholic social teaching, which had recently been both informed and encouraged by the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic church, known as Vatican II, that took place in Rome between 1962 and 1965. Vatican II was concerned with Church renewal, a dialogue with the modern world, and a quest for unity among Christian churches, but what was as important as any of these as far as Sursum Corda is concerned was its emphasis on pastoral, not dogmatic, teaching. Catholic social teaching has its roots in the medieval university, but since the end of the nineteenth century it has focused on the poor and the disadvantaged, and on the responsibilities of the Christian towards them. Concerned less with individual salvation than with a considered social good, the teaching now seeks to realize a kind of covenant, not a contract, between and among persons, one that can work to their mutual advantage, and realize whatever common good can be agreed upon. It insists upon the dignity of the individual, and the importance of the family in the social order. But it is also concerned with the demands of justice and equity, and in recent years at least, has come to promote what has been called a “preferential option for the poor,” which can mean many things to many people.

There is no doubt that both the founders of Sursum Corda and Fr. McKenna had an understanding of this teaching, and sought to instill it in their new community. The fact that relatively few of the residents were Catholic certainly did not dissuade them, which is not surprising since three of the other four developments constructed in Northwest 1 at about the same time, equally had religious roots, though Temple Courts was constructed by the Masons. Throughout much of the 1970’s the community at Sursum Corda flourished, though its founder’s style of management owed much

– some thought too much – to his army days, and as time went on he acquired the reputation of a man who did not suffer fools gladly. Of his own integrity, commitment, energy and persistence, however, there could be no doubt. He placed his own money into the project, and was given to confronting HUD officials on some of their regulations, which, much to the officials' credit, they often then proved willing to adjust. Resisting the two-bedrooms-per-unit model so much in use at the time, Stewart put the architectural contract out to tender, and his selection of town houses – with between one and six bedrooms in the 199 unit development – owed much to his Catholic commitment to the family, though perhaps it owed something to common sense as well. In any event, it is unique in the area. One other physical aspect of the place which has caused recent comment is the U-shaped street that runs through the complex – sometimes, rarely now, called the horseshoe – which, together with five or six separated areas (depending on how you count), some built around parking lots, make up *Sursum Corda*. These too would have been the architect's design, but they lent a sense of closeness, even intimacy, to the residences they enclosed which, in theory at least, would have accorded well with the idea of Christian community which the founders were pursuing.

I have already remarked that the style of management the early days witnessed could be abrasive. Minutes of early meetings of the Tenants' Association, preserved among Father McKenna's papers in Georgetown's Special Collections, record the difficulties the community encountered, sometimes at its meetings in an open air "meeting place," now a children's playground built into the project. It was here that the sense of covenant at which the founders had been aiming came up against the reality of residents who preferred not to take direction, as some understood it, from the white owners, and so would stay away. Evictions were to follow when a resident had amassed 25 points, and 12 and ½ points were assigned for missing a community meeting. Once opened, the split between founder and residents could only grow.

Finally the founder sold the property (which he owned) to a California company whose promises seemed fair. As the 1980's progressed, the company's interest in the property seemed at least to lessen, but when it became apparent that the plan was to evict

the remaining residents and sell the land on which the property stood for offices, the Tenants Association sprang into action. A rent strike was organized, with the rent monies placed in escrow; HUD was alerted; and the California company backed down, and agreed that the development could remain, and with a new resident manager, too.

This successful strike was led by a group of people including a woman, often in the papers, who will figure later in these pages, Ms. Jane Walters (as I shall call her), a well known community advocate and then a resident, of keen mind and sure political instincts, who worked in close association with a Roman Catholic nun, Sister Diane Roche, then living with five other nuns on the property. Together, and not without an effort, they secured Sister Roche's appointment as the new resident manager, so that by the late 1980's the community seemed refreshed and renewed. True enough, what Sister Roche found when she took up her appointment was an extraordinary record of neglect, of requests for repairs ignored, of tools sold, so she learned, to support drug habits, of studied and intentional neglect. She, too, had to contend with the expectations of the residents. She had, some years earlier, lived in the community as its servant; how could she now, some foolishly and wrongly estimated, countenance as un-Christian an act as eviction? No need to pay the rent, then. However, Sister Roche lived in the community and helped to guide it during what can only be described as its best years. Yet quite paradoxically these were also the years during which violence in and around the community reached its peak. Shortly before, at the direction of her order, leaving the community to assume other and greater responsibilities, Sister Roche was one of those who assisted with the creation of a resident-owned cooperative at Sursum Corda, which came about with a pepper-corn payment to the California company, and created a legal hurdle that set the stage for everything that is to follow in these pages.

And yet I fear that these representations of confrontation and strife will misrepresent the experience of many a resident. In its early days Sursum Corda was known, and not only to its residents, as "poor people's paradise." In the late 1980's, when I began working with the tutoring program there, tales of "Fr. McKinny" (as Fr. McKenna was known in the neighborhood) were everywhere pres-

ent: he had turned up the day before Thanksgiving with a turkey. He had paid the rent for the last two months. He bought our children clothes. The image of Fr. McKenna as a servant of the poor is so well established now, that it is difficult to convince those who know of him that his work was guided by a settled understanding of Catholic social teaching, and that it was social justice, not charity, that informed his days. A former Georgetown president, who knew and admired him, is one of the few I have met who referred to him first of all for his intellect, and remembered him as one who fully and accurately understood the philosophical implications of his work.

In fact, it is hard to think otherwise. The exact origins of the Georgetown tutoring program at Sursum Corda are unknown (I have tried hard to find them out), but I have always considered Fr. McKenna its founder, and that in office he had acted with several (unknown) brother Jesuits at Georgetown. Certainly in the very early 1970's it was in operation, a school bus bringing Georgetown students into the community to work with the children in their homes and on their homework. This book is only partly about that tutoring program, which I shall discuss in the course of things, but also about more recent matters, though it is from the vantage point of that program that I observed the community over the past twenty-seven years. When I joined it, the sudden development of the drug trade had necessitated moving the tutors from the homes into the Community Center, where, as it turned out, it became possible to undertake academic work of a far higher quality, while retaining the tradition of actually working with the children of Sursum Corda in their community, which many of the tutors come in time to prize, and somewhat to understand. Now begins my journal. The date given indicates the day I actually wrote my usually retrospective entry.

