

How To Survive in a Southern Ghetto

Nonfiction • Paul Bryant

Make sure you know how to smile. If you are black make sure you smile equally to everyone. If you are white make sure you smile to whites, but make sure you smile to blacks harder to show that you are not like other whites. If you are a woman make sure you don't smile to anyone because it might give them ideas. If you are a woman also make sure you wear boots, not only because this is where you will secure your tampons, but also because this is where you will hide your pocket knife. If you are a teenager make sure you smile to the people you think might jump you in the school bathrooms. Make sure you never go inside the school bathrooms. Make sure you do not wave to the SRO; he will get suspicious. If you do have to go to the bathroom make sure you hold your breath, unless you are having a bad day, then just make sure you inhale enough mellow. If you are a teenage boy and have to use the stall make sure you bring duct tape to secure the door shut; they frequently place money and crack in the toilet rolls so the locks are broken. If you are an adult make sure you stay single until you are able to leave; if you are married make sure you don't have any children until you are able to leave; if you have a family make sure your children know how to run, make sure your children know how to fall, make sure your children know the right time to get back up because most of the time it is better to just stay down. If you are a child make sure you do what your mom says; your dad's advice will hinder your ability to leave. At night make sure you always leave a lamp on in front of an open or thinly-curtained window—sure, it will increase your energy bill, but it will also increase your chances of waking up with all your belongings. Make sure you always wear clothes with holes, tears, mustard stains, extreme fading like

black to gray, night sky blue to blue jay blue, white to sweat yellow to make sure your clothes look like they belong on your body and no one else's. Make sure you always walk with a bop and not with a boop. Boops get you killed. If you are out alone at night make sure you pull your hood up and look at the ground so that strangers won't see your scared face. If you are old make sure you pray at least 3 times a day; kneel down beside your bed and clasp your hands; make sure you shake them fervently; it is ok if you don't really mean it; you have lived here for this long so it must be working. At a funeral make sure you wear all black, but if you are a man make sure you wear a light-colored tie; if you are a woman make sure you wear light-colored shoes to signify your happiness that the deceased is in a place better than here, even if that place is no place at all. At the funeral home make sure you are nice to the greasy, dark-suited white man and his family because they are overworked. Make sure you do not say the names of the dead because their shrines of wallet-sized pictures and one-dollar candles on their church's patio, in their school library, and on their neighborhood basketball court will not ward them away for long. Make sure you call everyone bitch, including yourself, be nondiscriminatory. If someone calls you bitch make sure you return the favor because we are equals under the authority of Providence. If you are a child make sure you go to school; it will help you be able to leave. If you are playing cops and robbers on the playground make sure you are a robber if you run fast; these cops don't have guns. Make sure you do not play in the street, not because you will get hit by a car, but because your mom will yell at you because she thinks you will get hit by a car. Make sure you know I'm telling you all this because I care. If you do not identify with your sex make sure you are careful who you tell because most people here are either radically Christian, homophobic (they don't know the difference) or both; I don't want you to end up like my high school football team's kicker who was jumped by three receivers and one linebacker in the bathroom because he playfully slapped their butts during practice. Make sure you go to church and shake the preacher's hand. Make sure you do not call people bitch in church. If you are having a bad day make sure you do not make it worse by doing something illegal. Make sure you take my advice with scrutiny. If you have once lived here you will always have once lived here and will never truly be able to leave. •