

Shooting Gallery

A high-profile killing and a high-profile drug bust made the newspaper headlines, but, for one cities neighborhood, crack-cocaine has become an everyday problem. The people who live there say the police and city council are turning their backs and letting the neighborhood die.

The problem, they say, is the color of money.

By George Boyd

The corner of Gottingen and Gerrish Streets. Mike Kharma's general store used to stand on that mottled patch of city lawn that now fronts that city-grown high-rise. And that drab sheet of city asphalt now covers what used to be Mrs. Rafuse's garden. I was born in this area. I used to climb its fences and scratch my knees on its streets.

The same streets that are now the very personification of death.

The area of which I speak is part of north end Halifax; it runs north from Cogswell, past the Casino Theatre, past George Dixon Recreation Centre and terminates at the intersection of North and Gottingen Streets.

A housing project called Uniacke Square now covers a good chunk of this territory, and there are private homes as well.

But "the rock" — or crack-cocaine — governs it. On these narrow streets and corridors, human beings are being shot down in cold blood.

Sweat drips from his hairline, running in streams over his wide, rum-colored face. Shivering, he taps out Cherie's phone number.

"My God," Donnie Downey cries into the phone, "They're trying to get me. They left a message on my machine and now somebody's been screwing with the car."

"Who, Donnie? Who?"

"I dunno..." His voice trails off into a whine.

"Well... look. Just send the superintendent down to look at the car."

"I did... I did..." he says.

Donnie Downey peers through his apartment window. The super is crouching and running his fingers over the metal work of the Chrysler Imperial. Standing and glancing towards the window, the super gives a thumbs-up signal.

"False alarm, I guess. I guess it was just nothing."

"Nothing! You call the message — NOTHING?" He stands with his eyes blanching like frying eggs and stares at the blinking answering machine.

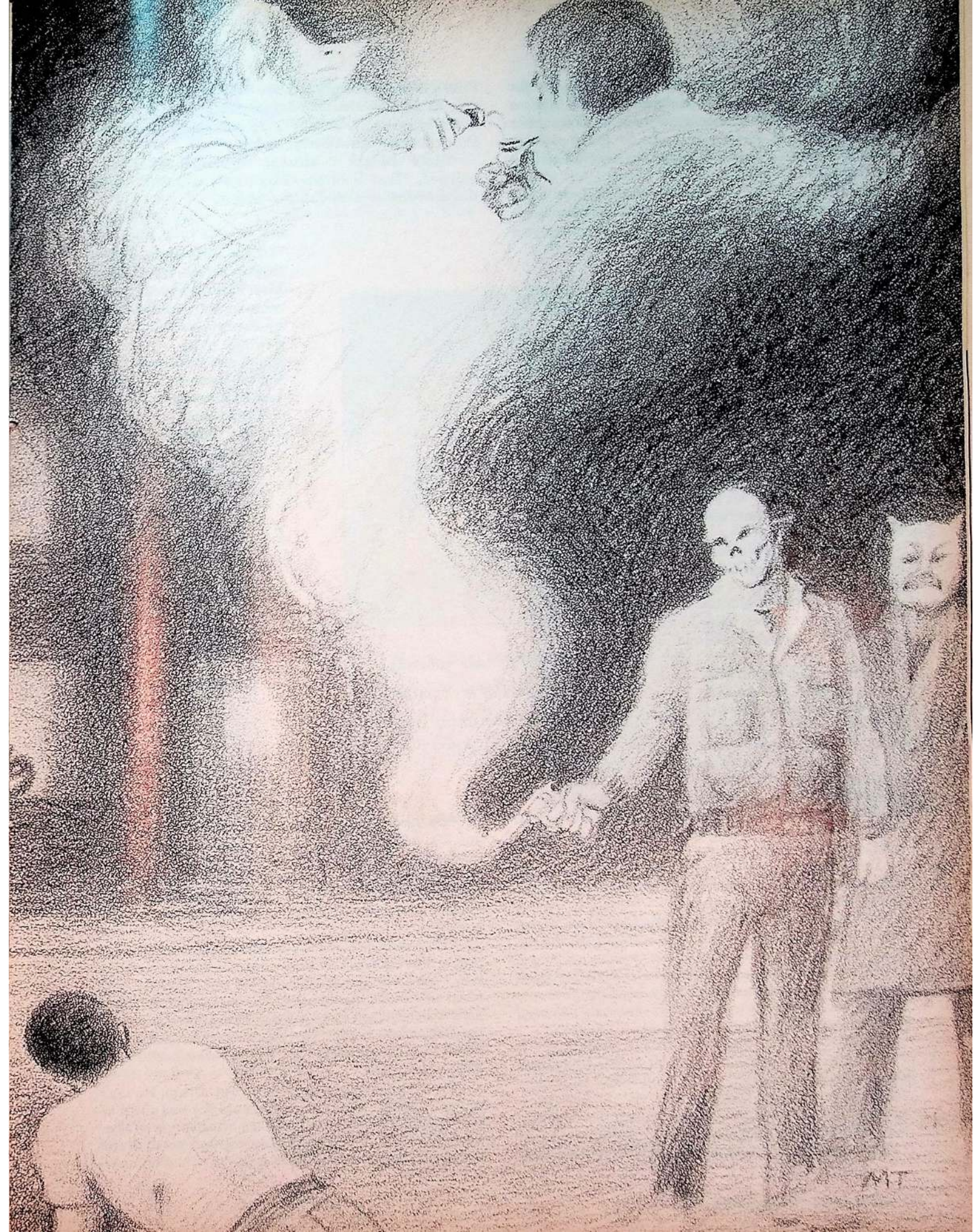
There are about 20 people gathered in the low-ceilinged meeting room in the north end library on Gottingen Street today. "The rock" has drawn them here. They are not users — in fact, few even really know what "the rock" looks like — but every single one of them has a friend, or a relative, or an acquaintance who has succumbed to its effects in one way or another.

The group — community and social workers, law school graduates, homemakers and the unemployed — calls itself CCAD, or Concerned Citizens Against Drugs. They smile, the handshakes are bouncing, but lurking behind all of that is fear.

Mark Daye is the publisher of *The Rap* — a black newsmagazine. "People in the community," he says, "they really feel genuinely afraid. Black and white — everybody's looking out their windows, looking out their doorways, looking over their shoulders. A lot of people are talking about moving out of the neighborhood because of the fear. The fear is what the drug is doing to the community — it's tearing it apart."

After he was arrested and booked for possession with the intent to traffic cocaine in the summer of 1988, the Citadel Boxing Club asked Donnie Downey to resign from its coaching staff. Initially, Downey, a former international amateur boxing champion who coached youngsters at the Citadel Club, resisted. Boxing was his life. Eventually, however, Downey gave in.

That night, at the home of his common-law wife, he lamented, "Somebody's out to get me, Cherie, I know it." Tears welled in his eyes as she massaged his temple. "Somebody's out to get me," he said.



In her kitchen, Doris Marchand prepares supper for her 14-year-old son and her two grandchildren. She's a big-boned lady, freckles strategically sprinkled about her honey-colored face. She places a colander full of potatoes under the tap, then laughs. "Honey," she says, "when I get stoned, it'll be on liquor."

Over her shoulder, through the window, I can easily see "the stoop" — that area of Gottingen Street that fronts Uniacke Square. It's a drive-thru for drugs. Getting your poison here, they say, is as easy as ordering a hamburger at McDonald's.

"I don't know — I see them hangin' out there and the cars comin' and goin', but I don't pay it no mind. I see it and I don't see it — just like that. All you can do is pray."

With murders, knifings and robberies, Doris says this isn't the time to be talking to a reporter about "the stoop". Her grandson enters and lays his head on her lap. "All you can do is pray. Ain't that right, buddy?"

The child nods — as if he's used to praying. Doris says the boy's mother — her daughter-in-law — is addicted to crack-cocaine. "And that's why I got the two grandchildren."

Apparently, the mother would abandon her children when she went out on her daily "run" in search of a fix. It got so bad, says Doris, Children's Aid diagnosed the youngest as mentally retarded. He was three and he couldn't talk in sentences or use the bathroom by himself. "Neglect — that's what did it. The drug problem — same as what's going on out there."

Doris smiles, and says her grandson has come around and should be entering school on his fifth birthday, but she no longer wants to talk.

As I step into the courtyard fronting her home, a grey Toyota pulls up and screeches to a halt. A man, white, about 35 years old, jumps out.

"You got a gram, man?" he asks me. Red-rimmed eyes assess the situation from a ruddy face.

"No, no, I don't."

"You know anybody that does?"

"No."

He strolls to a stairwell and peers up. Then he jumps into the Toyota and speeds away.

He'd been acting strange.

Then one Friday night at the Club 55 on Gottingen

Street, Donnie Downey left the "Fifties-Sixties Dance," only to do a sudden 360-degree turn, come back and loudly exclaim, "Goodnight Creighton Street! Goodnight Preston! Goodnight Cherrybrook!"

Some thought it strange. Others laughed, and quipped, "That Donnie's crazy, isn't he?" Still others thought it had a morbid ring of finality.



"It's pitiful," one man says.

"Drugs are part of my family, my sons, and life. Something could be done about it."

If you walk south on Gottingen Street from Doris Marchand's house, you'll come to the venerable Derby Tavern. It's a dark, windowless place — all the chairs and tables are sandwiched between two giant television screens. In the ceilings, small fans churn, blowing cigarette smoke down into the faces of the laughing patrons.

As in many bars in Halifax, there are two distinct societies at work here. The first sits chatting and smoking, sipping draughts, while the other surreptitiously passes grams and quarter-ounces under the table when the staff isn't looking.

Poole Slaunwhite sips draught.

He's a 59-year-old retiree who absorbs everything through roaming, rheumy eyes. His eyes are his most striking feature; they betray his honesty... and his hurt. He says his son was arrested in a recent drug bust.

"It's pitiful. Drugs are a part of my family, my sons and life. And things could be done about it. When I was coming up in Africville, I never heard about it — didn't know nothing about it. Like hash — if you hadda asked me for some hash, I would've made you some in the frying pan. And grass? Well, I would've ran outside and got you some.

"They sell their life. Well, like friends and personal people that I got, I can't even trust no more. On no occasion. I take a little lady off the street and I feed her. And when she leaves, she takes \$2,200 worth of gold. That's hard to believe, ain't it? I call Sgt. Dixon down at the police station — I want him to come and investigate it. You know what he asked me? If I had sex with her? That's what he asked me."

Slaunwhite says he hung up on Sgt. Dixon. He says he took "the girl" off the streets because she was about to kill herself by walking in front of a moving bus. Why? Because she had no place to call home, and because she hadn't slept or had a fix in three days.

After giving her a blanket, he went to the grocery store to buy her something to eat. When he returned, his place had been ransacked and \$2,200 worth of jewellery was missing. "She hawked it," he says, "to buy dope."

His gaze fades into the depths of the chattering crowd. "That girl," he says, "that girl."

"That girl" he speaks of is his daughter, and no doubt Slaunwhite, honest and proud, would tell you that if he only knew. But they say he doesn't recognize his own daughter any more. They say it's not intentional; he really doesn't know who she is.

For years, Donnie Downey worked out at the YMCA on South Park Street. He was so well known there that clerks would just toss him the keys as he stepped into the lobby.

Dressed in his red and black Reebok sweatsuit, he pumped weights and ran laps around the gym.

On this day, he had come to the gym to work out with his cousin.

But then, two white men approached and took Donnie aside. One was tall and heavy set, the other of medium build with sandy hair. The conversation was animated.

Donnie's cousin sensed something was wrong. Later, in the car, he asked: "Who were those two white men, Donnie? Were they bikers?"

Donnie turned the key and looked straight through the windshield. Sliding the lever into drive, he silently pushed the Imperial into the traffic.

A cold, shadowy night on the stoop. Clear. I stand with my Sony tape recorder, recording the sounds for a radio documentary.

A young girl — dark as milk chocolate — turns the corner. When she sees me, she halts, suspended, as if held by invisible strings. With eyes as big as silver dollars, she stares straight into my eyes. Her coat flutters in the breeze, revealing a suckling baby. Her eyes transmit a communication — a wound that I can't quite decipher.

As she starts to walk away, I realize she is too weak to speak, her baby, too feeble to cry.

Hallowe'en night in Halifax has become known as Mardi Gras. Under a cloak of darkness, the freaks come out, parading in grotesque Hallowe'en costume and color,

transforming downtown streets into a carnival of Draculas, Frankensteins and goblins. Everyone, seemingly, plays a role; everyone desperately trying to be someone else.

Not Donnie Downey. He intended to spend this Mardi Gras night quietly at his uncle's home on Creighton Street, sipping beer and laughing.

His uncle, father and friends were perched in front of the television, watching WWF wrestling. They were enjoying it, but Donnie was preoccupied. After all, boxing was his game, wasn't it?

Boxing... probably he thought winning the silver medal at the Edmonton Commonwealth Games had been the highlight of his career, maybe even his life. All tumbling down now, he thought. His life, down, down, down, crumbling around his feet.

Why was this happening to him?

After all, apart from the drug charges, his life wasn't any different than any other 33-year-old black man's, was it? Really? The father of four, a high school graduate, he had even attended university. Everything, it seemed, had fallen as right as an autumn rain.

Why then, Goddamit, why?

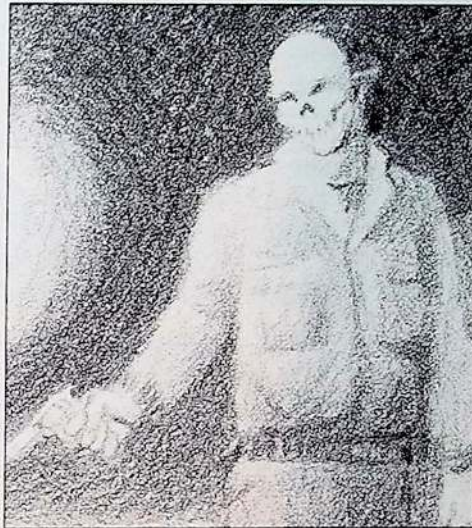
Of the last 19 job applications he'd sent out, and after interview upon interview, he'd managed to land

only one job offer — cleaning floors in the toilets of the ferry terminal in Dartmouth.

A college education? It wasn't worth shit if your face was...

He stood, stretched and walked to the window. Outside on the narrow street, young trick-or-treaters, accompanied by their parents, padded about. In a few years, a lot of them might be dying down on "the stoop," or inside one of the houses, and he was "helping" them, some of them, all of them maybe. He was delivering the poison — distributing the magic that made them forget what adulthood and blackness means in Nova Scotia.

Genocide? He laughed. That's what they were calling it, but my God, merely to participate in this system as a black person meant you took risks. Suicidal, genocidal — what's the difference? You took risks and the system would find its way to exploit you. It's like this: either you distributed the poison, or you sniffed it in some unfamiliar house. Either way you were going to be used and manipulated. And he had been used.



Apart from the drug charges, Donnie Downey's life wasn't any different from any other 33-year-old black man's, was it?

His wasn't the first high-profile bust. Brian Phillips, a local broadcaster, had been the first. Then another broadcaster, Bruce Dorton, had stepped before the judge. Soon, it would be Donnie Downey's turn. And what did the three have in common other than an affiliation with the same drug? The enemy, he thought. The enemy. But to his knowledge, no one was willing, or able to identify the enemy.

The people of the north end would say the enemy is wealthy and as white as alabaster — the south end white kids who come with their fancy cars and their money to buy their drugs and turn their north end neighborhood into a shooting gallery.

Those in the south end would say the enemy is poverty and as black as pitch — black pushers poisoning young whites with the cocaine and the crack they peddle from the north end.

But Donnie himself knew that the enemy really wasn't a question of neighborhood or even of race but of economics. The color — or rather, the colorlessness — of money.

The enemy is the dollar, the establishment, the almighty system. It's responsible for the current malaise.

Genocide? Yes, but in his particular case, it was also suicide. It had to be. The very first time he decided to become connected with drugs was the day he'd signed his warrant.

Genocide? Yes, but it's also suicide.

He slumped back on the couch. "And that's why they resort to drugs," he said aloud.

"What's that?" Someone asked.

"Nothin' man... just... nothin'."

He yawned and chuckled. The telephone message had said he wouldn't live to see Mardi Gras. Well, here it is, fellas, and I'm still a breathing stiff.

A crisp, tapping sound came from the living room window. The group inside rushed to it, throwing back the curtains and staring. Before them stood a gargoyle, a masked man, waving. All cut-up in laughter. One by one, they went back to their couches and chairs. The gargoyle lifted his mask. Only Donnie was standing in the window. He must have known the man. "Betcha don't know who that is," he called back as he ran outside.

There was silence for a few moments and then six shots were fired. Inside, the wrestling fans continued their vigil. After all, the 22-calibre sounded just like kiddies' firecrackers on Mardi Gras night.

The first shot missed Downey, but the others slammed on the mark, sending him reeling into a fetal position on the pavement.

"Get 'em Mountain Man!" somebody screamed from in front of the TV.

"Yeah — break his neck!" someone else yelled.

With the gargoyle walking briskly away, Donnie Downey crawled into his uncle's hallway, bleeding and struggling for breath. "Tell Dad they got me," he murmured. About an hour later in the hospital, he was pronounced dead.

The papers said the murders were drug-related. And as the police chalked off the murder site, Creighton

Street was alive with the sounds of windows and doors being bolted.

Another night. Later. The night is as clear as crystal, and just as cold. Three black youths stomp from foot to foot, blowing into their fists. A green sedan glides to the curb and halts. A window powers down and a white fist stabs the air with cash. One of the youths runs to the fist, takes the cash and replaces it with a cellophane bag full of white powder. The transaction is completed within seconds and, as the sedan weaves into the Gottingen Street currents, a black and white paddy-wagon rolls by.

The three youths disappear into the night.

A couple of days after the Downey murder, a combined force of the Halifax police and the RCMP raid several homes and crack houses in the Uniacke Square area. Using a maul hammer to break down some of the doors, they arrest about 20 people and charge them with various drug offences. Const. Paul MacDonald of the HPD says the operation took about eight months to prepare and involved a number of police undercover agents, including two police dogs.

For all their time, effort and trouble, however, police netted only about \$2,200 worth of illegal drugs, predominantly crack-cocaine. Many in the north end say the police action simply isn't acceptable.

"Don't make me laugh," says Miles Stevens, a reformed drug user. "I used to use that amount all by myself — in one day! They [the police] got to make themselves look good. They made this bust and what did they get? Peanuts. It cost the taxpayer triple, if not quadruple. Know what I mean? Sure, it looks good in black-and-white in the papers."

"The amount of drugs seized was not a significant amount," admits Const. MacDonald, "but it's the first drug bust involving crack-cocaine in the Atlantic Provinces. It's not the amount so much, it's the number of people involved. The operation itself was aimed at the street level."

"But they're dealing with penny-ante shit," Miles insists. "You pull them [the pushers] off the streets and there's a dozen or so standing there to take their place. As if the man doesn't know who's supplying the city. As if He doesn't know who's bringing it in. If they want to stop it, why don't they hit the source?"

Most people who live in the north end agree. Of the police, of the city fathers, they will say that if they're not helping to quell a problem, well then, by sheer inaction, they're aiding it, abetting it.

That's what Cherie, Donnie Downey's common law wife, believes. But she goes further. She calls it genocide. "It's well known," she says angrily. "You can walk there and see it. They don't need nobody to tell them, they can see it. What is it — their wish that all black men die this way? That all black children die this way?"

She stops, considers. "You know, it's like the system is poisoning us, the system is poisoning us.... Because they won't help us." □