Growing Up in Chicago

Tony Romano

My father arrived in Chicago in January 1958. He settled into an apartment, started working in a factory as a tailor for Hart Schaffner & Marx Clothiers on Division Street, then sent for the rest of his family. My mother, my brother, and I arrived in June of 1958. I was a year old.

For thirteen years we lived on Ohio Street, a half-block away from St. Columbkille School on Marshfield Street and the adjoining church on Grand Avenue. Throughout those thirteen years, I don't recall venturing much beyond certain boundaries: Ashland and Damen from east to west, Chicago and Grand from north to south. My parents never owned a car, so we'd hop on the Grand Avenue bus and make our way to Lincoln Park Zoo on an occasional Sunday in the summer, where we'd eat homemade meatloaf sandwiches wrapped in oil-soaked wax paper. When I was seven, we spent several weeks in Italy, minus my father. And I worked with the neighborhood milkman when I was thirteen. But otherwise, my entire world existed within these fairly narrow confines.

Despite the fact that we had little money—so little my mom had to work nights at a factory in the neighborhood—and didn't go anywhere, I don't recall feeling deprived. Food was always plentiful, more than plentiful. The apartment, though small, never felt cramped. The only time I recall my security threatened was after we'd moved to a slightly bigger apartment two houses down. I came home from school and had forgotten and tried to barrel through the familiar back door. When it wouldn't budge, I peered inside to see it barren, which sent a shock of abandonment through me that I've never forgotten. After a few pounding heartbeats, I finally recalled where my family and all our stuff had gone.

The neighborhood provided its own security and riches. I'd usually be the first one outside with my bat and sixteen-inch softball, waiting for friends to join me. We'd play at the schoolyard, where we had spray-painted bases on the concrete. You'd have to hit the ball to left or left center because the school took up most of the field, but we didn't mind. We'd be out there every day until we couldn't see the ball. And there was never a single adult around to help us form teams or make calls on the field or to keep track of who had won or lost. We saw adults passing through, of course, on their way home from or going to work, but they never paid any mind to our world, and

we certainly didn't pay much mind to theirs. I had no conception of Little League or Pee Wee football or any other organized sports.

If we didn't have enough players for a softball game, we'd played pinners on the side of the stairs, a game in which a "batter" tried to hit a curb with a rubber ball so that it would carom over fielders' heads. When we weren't playing softball or pinners, we'd play marbles—for keeps. Or we'd see who could spit the farthest. Often, we pitched pennies or quarters on sidewalk squares, then graduated to poker. We built cork-shooters out of sawn broomsticks, clothespins, and red produce rubber bands that shot flattened bottle caps hundreds of feet. It's a small miracle no one ended up in the hospital. We created puppet shows on the back porch of our apartment, the same place where I unraveled firecrackers and poured the powder into cardboard cylinders to make more spectacular fireworks. A few times we pulled down the school's fire escape; I still recall the rusty creaking of the ladder unfolding and stepping onto the wobbly steps.

When no friends were around, usually because they went to Lake Michigan (I rarely joined them as I didn't know how to swim and feared they'd throw me in), I busied myself reading on my front stoop, mainly comic books, Superman, Batman, World's Finest. Every Thursday the new comics would come out, and I'd have to scrounge the neighborhood for pop

bottles, which were worth two cents each. I still recall the anticipation of seeing the new issues as I walked the three blocks to the far corner store, turning the wire rack, deciding which ones I could afford. I took great care with the comics I bought, never folding over the pages. Sometimes I'd spread the issues on the floor of my room or on my bed, just to take in the splash of colors. I must have had a collection of about a thousand comics. As a teenager, I started reading science fiction and mysteries and stored away my comics in the attic. Much to my dismay, and my heart still aches to think of this, my mother cleaned out the attic one day and threw out my entire collection. I have a vague recollection of my brother selling off a portion of the comics before this incident, but I'm not sure. Some of the comics were his, and he could have believed he was claiming his own.

At night we played elaborate rounds of ringalivio, where one team hid and the other would have to find, tag, and bring the hiders back to the jail at the school steps. If four people were captured, let's say, an uncaptured teammate could spring out and duck between guards to tag and free his entire team. I can still feel the ache in my chest from running too long. Other nights we played kick the can, caught lighting bugs and put them in jars, listened to both 45s and LPs on a battery-operated record player, walked to Battista's fish store for Italian lemonade, bought steaming hot

dogs covered with fresh onions and chopped tomatoes from a man with a cart, stuck our ears close to street lights to hear the buzz reverberating through the pole, and eavesdropped on adult conversations. This is the only fond memory I have of adults, men and women sitting around on lawn chairs or meeting at each other's houses for coffee and pastries. Their talk was loud, devoid of weighty matters—at least I can't recall much—but there was an intimacy and casualness to their talk that I still admire and miss.

I feel as if I grew up with three languages: English, Italian, and Chicago. Most of the adults sitting on lawn chairs at night were fluent in all three tongues. *Hey,* Wileyo, veni qua*, Tell me, you want two or tree sugar in your coffee?* When my novel came out, I imagined friends from the old neighborhood and even a few relatives remark: "Hey, Antney, how did you write those sentences? You don't talk nothing like that." Sometimes I wonder the same. When I talk with people, my thought process and my very vocabulary is different than when I sit down to write. I suspect the difference has something to do with my fear of seeming pretentious, which would have made me a pariah in the old neighborhood and probably in my own house, where I didn't have much use for the private vocabulary and cadences I was creating during my reading time.

While much of this may sound idyllic, and it certainly still feels that way to me—vendors passing through our street on wooden carts selling lupini beans and sunflower seeds, tomatoes and watermelon, others pedaling a sharpening tool for scissors and knives, calling the mothers to bring out their dull blades—the neighborhood included tensions. Gangs such as the Gaylords and the Latin Kings painted their emblems on sidewalks. One time I felt the foundation of our apartment quake from the vibration of a light pole being torn from its base and landing a few feet from our front door, all of which I discovered after rushing outside. Minutes earlier, a gang member had thrown a baseball bat into the windshield of a rival's car that lost control and rammed into the pole. The driver stormed from his car unhurt, fire in his eyes.

One time a Puerto Rican family tried to move into our neighborhood, but moved out shortly after when a brick shattered their picture window. I never saw a black person in our neighborhood until maybe 1968, though I knew that a "black neighborhood" wasn't far away. After Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot, I felt a visceral fear that riots would overtake our streets.

You'd think that we would have talked about some of these tensions at school, but St. Columbkille preferred to remain insulated from the worries of the outside world. We learned our multiplication tables and memorized

our catechism lessons and recited our confessions, but we didn't talk about injustice or intolerance or anything remotely political. The one exception was my 7th grade teacher for whom we campaigned, handing out leaflets for his aldermanic aspirations. He was the cool teacher with the long hair that everyone liked.

How did this Chicago upbringing shape me? I'm not sure because I was always chronically shy as a boy, always on the periphery of the action. I feel as if I've been watching people my entire life. But the watching has been of Chicago, and I think the city has become part and parcel of my DNA. And through my observations, I've learned that you shouldn't throw things at other people or at other people's houses, regardless of who lives in those houses, but that this does happen. If you stand by and watch, the brick tossing will happen again. I've learned that people aren't going to give you things for free, but if you scrape, you're going to make a pretty good living. I've learned that attics, though quaint, are miserable storage spaces. I've learned that young people can negotiate this world fairly well on their own, that they don't need to rely on adults to call balls and strikes and to make everything right for them. I've learned to root for the underdog because in a city of big shoulders, high rises dwarfing the many factories dotting the

boulevards and avenues, not everyone is on equal footing, not everyone can prosper without a helping hand or a fighting chance.