

# A Chicago Story

by Julian Sereno

“The South Side of Chicago ... is the baddest part of town,” lyrics from the early ‘70s Jim Croce song, flitted through my consciousness as I planned my weekend visit for the 45th reunion of the University of Chicago Class of 1972. U of C is located in Hyde Park, on the South Side. I resided there for a decade after graduation.

As appalling as the current gun violence is, twas ever thus on the South Side. Al Capone got the notoriety but hardly started it; it was worse in the late 1800s. Numerically, there were more murders in Chicago in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s than there are now. The murder rate is higher because Chicago’ population is smaller. The difference between now and then is firepower. Then it was .22s and .38s, now its 9mm.s and assault rifles, where the bullets rip through metal, cinderblock and brick as though they were tissue paper.

I was going to avoid bad areas like the plague, straight from O’Hare to the Hyatt in Hyde Park, right around the corner from the spot where Barack and Michelle first kissed. A minibus service ran large vans that stopped at all the hotels. I boarded one along with another eight or nine passengers. Two Russian women, in their 20s and clad in glitz, sat next to me. The van stopped at hotels in Old Town and the Gold Coast where passengers disembarked. When it headed south on Lake Shore Drive, the Russian women and I were the only remaining passengers.

The driver asked them if they were sure they knew where they were going. Neither could speak a word of English, but one held up her cell phone. The driver shook his head and continued. To my horror, he exited Lake Shore Drive at 39th

Street -- Pershing Road -- in the heart of Chicago gun violence country, and zigzagged up to 43rd Street and finally to the address 64 East 46th Street, a low building behind an iron fence. The Russian women smiled and waved bye. I said “das vedanya,” and the young women departed.

The driver said, “That must be the worst Air B&B in the world.” I agreed, and then thought to myself, “Unless those women are about to be trafficked.”

As disturbing as that thought was, it was a late spring Friday afternoon and I was in the heart of gang violence country. I feared for my life, a familiar feeling harkening to my arrival in Chicago nearly 50 years ago. I suspect the driver was scared too.

“Where is your hotel?” he asked.

“53rd and Harper,” I replied.

He drove south and came to 47th Street. “We’re not taking this east,” he said with conviction.

I said, “After 51st Street is Washington Park.”

“We are not going though Washington Park,” he said even more adamantly.

So we went east on 51st Street, the southern border of Washington Park, with me crouching in the back of the van as though its flimsy metal shell would stop a stray bullet nowadays.

When we crossed Cottage Grove Avenue and entered Hyde Park, I breathed a sigh of relief. Safe again, another old familiar feeling. After checking into the hotel, I decided to walk the two miles to campus. Early in the walk, my son Alex called from Raleigh to ask about my trip. After I described the ride from the airport, he told me I needed to report what I had seen to a sex trafficking hotline, and suggested I Google one for Chicago.

I arrived on campus and sat on a bench in the main quadrangle and Googled Chicago Sex Trafficking Hotline. It showed me websites with every statistic you

could imagine about sex trafficking in Chicago and in Illinois. But there was no phone number.

So I approached a campus cop and told him my story. He told me to call 911, which I did. The 911 operator heard me out and then put me hold. After a while she came back, and said, “There is nothing we can do.”

“You didn’t witness any coercion,” she explained. “All you saw was two adult women walking into a house completely of their own free will. There is no reason for the police to do anything.”

She thanked me for calling and said that there would be a record of my call and the address where the women were dropped off. And that was that.

That evening was the class dinner. It was wonderful to see my classmates.

The next morning, while reading the *Chicago Tribune* online over coffee, there was an article about the first of that weekend’s shootings. Somebody shot at an unmarked police car and the police returned fire and shot him dead -- in Washington Park.

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