

## ■ ■ ■ THE GARBAGE STORY

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Summer afternoons you could always find the women on my block sitting out on the front porch steps. But it wasn't always the same front steps. No, those women were nomads; they migrated from porch to porch to porch. It was the 1950s on the southwest side of Chicago and it was like one big, daytime pajama party. All the women worked at home back then and when they'd take a break, they'd come out to those front porches to set each other's hair and do each other's nails and talk about what they had cleaned that day. We little kids sat out there with them, acting bored; but the truth is, I could have listened to their stories forever.

See the ancient Greeks had creation myths, the ancient Egyptians, the first Americans and other groups too. Well my neighborhood had creation myths, stories from when we kids were babies and our neighborhood was just being built. I lived by 87th and Kedzie, the far southwest corner of the city, and back then when I was growing up the edges of the Chicago were still forest and farmland.

The women would say, "You kids hear the rat story?" We'd say "yes" and then they'd tell it to us again. Apparently as each new block of our neighborhood was being carved out of the forest, the city didn't do a very good job of clearing away the debris and there was a vermin problem. So my neighbors took it upon themselves to get rid of the fallen trees and piles of brush. They started setting fires all over the place. "And sure enough," the women told us, "out came rats - running, screeching, hollering, their fur coats ablaze with red flame!" It was a comforting image. Then they'd send us little kids off to naptime.

Another time they'd say, "You kids hear the garbage story?" We'd say "yes" and then they'd tell it to us again. When my family and neighbors moved into their new homes, my block was a complete mud hole - no paved streets and no sidewalks. We didn't even have front porches. The garbage men refused to come into our block because their trucks kept getting stuck in the mud or in the ruts and holes of the dirt street.

"So every morning," the women told us, "you would see this army of men marching down the street like zombies holding these greasy, stained paper bags at arms length so that their work clothes didn't get dirty." No plastic Hefty bags back then. "Carrying the garbage," the ladies told us, "three blocks away to an open field by the bus stop that everyone used as a dump.

"Finally," the ladies said, "we got streets and the city said we could have alleys too. The garbage trucks could come in back there. But we knew how you kids liked to play out back. If there were cars and trucks, someone might get hurt. So we said, 'No, no alleys' even though that meant each week we'd have to carry our garbage cans out front to the street to be picked up out there. But we did the job."

And that was always the point of these stories: we did it. We cared. We took care of our neighborhood.

We'd act so bored. I remember draping my body across the railings of those front porches, looping my arms and legs through the curly-Q ironwork, being held there day after day by the possibility of receiving adult attention.

Then in 1964, when I was fourteen and a freshmen in high school, my Mother died and those ladies became all the more important to me. My Dad worked two jobs and my grandparents who lived with us were getting old, so if I needed to be driven somewhere the ladies drove me. A couple of times some of the ladies even went to my parent-teacher conferences. We teenage girls would see the women sitting out on one of the front porches, we'd go and talk to them.

"How's the biz?" they'd ask.

That was our code word for, "How's the boys? Who do you like this week?" We'd tell the ladies whom we liked and who didn't like us back. Then one of the ladies would put an arm around us, give us a hug and say, "Oh, those boys! They don't know what they're missing."

Sometimes the support we got from the ladies wasn't even asked for. Right before our eighth grade graduation dance, the women got in a big discussion about whether or not we girls should shave our legs. The anti-shaving group argued that the hair on our legs was light and if we shaved then it would only grow in dark. But the pro-shaving group said, "Yeah, but what if the hair shows under their nylons and someone teases them? What if they get embarrassed at the dance?" It was great because I didn't know what to do. And I could just sit back and let this committee of mothers decide the future of my legs.

Another day I came out of my house and the women were sitting on my front porch. Mrs. McQuaid looked up at me, her voice dripping with sympathy and said, "Ah, Sue, got your friend. Got your friend today, huh?"

Well, I'd never heard the word used that way, but by the way she said it, I knew what it meant. I said, "yes" feeling happy to have been betrayed by my grandmother who must have told. I beamed; the ladies beamed and I knew I'd become part of that circle of women. There were days then and there are still days now I would give just about anything for one of those big woman hugs you could get on the front porches of 84th Street.

Then we got to be older teens in high school, some of us sixteen, seventeen, eighteen and the tone on the front porches changed. We became more independent. We argued with the ladies about whether the Beatles' hair was too long, whether the hemlines on our skirts were too high and whether the curfews they imposed were too early. But even as we argued, the ladies looked at us with pride. It was normal breaking away. They knew we were good kids. We weren't with the rough kids on the benches of Ashburn Park smoking cigarettes. No, we were where we belonged; we were on the front porch. It was okay to argue there - about everything except... race which the women did every single day.

Back then in the 1960s, the southwest side of the city was all white and people weren't shy about expressing their beliefs. The more racist-sounding ladies would say things such as, "They live twenty in a room. They have too many children." (This from a staunch, Catholic woman with ten children of her own.) And then it would begin. "If the colored try to move in here, we're leaving." "That's right. They'll ruin the neighborhood." "And why? If we can do it, they can do it. We raised ourselves up." Then the one or two of the ladies who thought of themselves as more liberal-minded would say, "It's just poverty. They need to educate themselves. It'll take time."

The discussions really got heated up if the ladies had been watching the noon news that day and had seen pictures of Civil Rights demonstrations down south. It never failed to amaze me that all of us could be looking at the same picture and some of us would only see the billy clubs of the Southern sheriffs swinging down on unarmed people; others of us would only see the arms of the demonstrators defiantly reaching out resisting the police.

Now John Kennedy had been one of my heroes. The first Irish Catholic President, for goodness sake! One of my other heroes was my Dad. He taught at an all-black high school. When both of them had been alive, they had been in favor of Civil Rights. But not most of the Irish Catholic women and their husbands who sat on our front porches. They'd say, "Demonstrators. Troublemakers. They're asking for it. Things can't change that fast." I'd listen to them and think, "Well, at least we're not the South."

Sometimes those racial discussions would get so tense, they'd begin to threaten the unity on the front porches. So one of the ladies who was a peacemaker would signal, "Hey! That's enough now" by saying, "Oh well, there's good and bad people in every race." The conversation would begin to dwindle down. The only thing left to discuss was how many good of each and how many bad. Now most of the ladies *knew* there was more bad in *their* race. They had stories from their husbands who were policemen or stories from friends who had lost their homes in changing

neighborhoods.

But the biggest proof for their point of view was how people kept up their houses, how much garbage was around people's homes. Once or twice a year, I'd take the elevated train with some of the women to go shopping downtown at Marshall Fields. The southside "el" zoomed you behind the three flats and apartment buildings in all-black neighborhoods. We could actually look down into the people's homes. For many of the ladies, they'd look down and it was like - "Hey! I rest my case. Look at all that garbage. Just take a look."

As we sped by the houses, you could see them looking down, mentally counting and adding it up - "Bad, bad, bad, bad, good - see, if she can do it, they can do it - bad, bad, bad." Sometimes they'd even whisper, "See, they're lazy. Would you like to live with that? They don't take care of their homes." And the other ladies would counter, "No. They just need someone to show them how to clean up. They don't know how."

The "el" jogged along the tracks, the doors sliced opened and closed at each stop and I searched for something to say back to the ladies. But I didn't know what to say. Then one of the ladies would make a joke or put a protective arm around us girls and I'd melt back in. I didn't want to lose them I guess. And besides like I said I didn't have any stories of my own to say back to the ladies. Then one day I had a chance to go get some.

It was the fall of 1966. I was a sophomore and there were lots of changes at my all-girl Catholic High School. The nuns had changed the lengths of their skirts - their hemlines came all the way up to the calves of their legs! Plus the nuns were given permission to change their names - from dead saints, mostly male names, to their original names. So one day you'd have all these Sister Vincent Theonela 'sand Sister John Anastasia's walking down the hall and the next day it'd be Sister Maggie O'Ryan. Or my favorite, Sister Antoinette, Sister Tony because Sister Tony was a modern nun. She thought the nuns should get out of the convent and more into the world.

One afternoon Sister Tony asked three of us girls who were on Student Council if we'd like to go with her and observe a community meeting. She'd been invited to a meeting of the Lawndale Association, a group of neighbors who met on the west side of Chicago to better their community. I thought this was great. Chicago is still very segregated but as I said, back in the sixties it was even more so. The color lines throughout the city were clearly drawn. The southwest side was all-white. The west side was all-black. So here was my chance to get some stories of my own to say back to the ladies on the front porch. I felt open-minded, cool and adventurous - till we got there.

We crossed the color line and drove into the west side. This was just two months after the 1966 west side riots. Whole city blocks had burned down around Madison Avenue. The fire and smoke had reached two miles high into the sky. Just to remember those times in addition to Chicago, in that one summer alone, sections of 21 cities around the country had gone up in flames. Twenty-two race riots in the space of just a couple of months. And we drove in.

There were boarded up storefronts, graffiti painted on the wood, "Kill White Gestapos!" "Kill Honky Sons of Bitches!" We drove past bombed out buildings, vacant lots filled with garbage, alleys strewn with broken glass, litter and newspapers blown by the wind and sucked into cyclone fences until you couldn't see through the fences any longer, streets and sidewalks so cracked they kept alternating between concrete, gravel, pavement complete gravel and mud, men lounging on those street corners, leaned up against rusted out cars, no wheels, no doors, sipping out of brown paper bags and eyeing us and I felt so white and so vulnerable and everywhere I looked I saw stories of the wrong kind to say back to the ladies on the block.

We drove to the rectory where the meeting was supposed to take place. A group of people was sitting on the rectory front steps. John, a large man with graying hair, the leader of the group and the one who had invited Sister Tony, walked up to us as we were getting out of the car and said, "A little confusion - we're locked out. But don't worry," he said. "Someone will be here soon with the key."

And there we were in this neighborhood of what seemed to be all black people. The four of us - three white high school girls in our green and brown plaid uniforms and one modern nun standing there, grinning away. Then out of the corner of my eye, in a vacant lot next to where we'd park the car, I saw two rats fighting over what looked like an empty box of crackers.

One of the women sitting on the front porch must have sensed how uncomfortable we were and called, "Child, come sit over here." I didn't know which one of us girls she was talking to but I moved first. I went and sat down in the space she had cleared in front of her. She patted her knees for me to lean my back against her legs and her friend, a heavyset woman, scooted in next to me. I felt protected, surrounded, just a little white head peeking out.

The woman I was leaning up against was named Nona. Nona was so thin; I could feel the bones of her legs in my back even with her frilly skirt with all the slips underneath. She was dressed in her Sunday best because she and her friend, May, had just been to the flea market that day. Nona wore white gloves, carried a flowered purse and on top of her head sat a flowered hat that had a single, paper rose rising into the air like a periscope. May wore her prized possession from the day's shopping - a mink stole with the dead head of the mink still on it.

After introducing ourselves just to be polite, I asked Nona, "Where do you live?" Nona leaned down swatted May on the shoulder and said, "With this old thang!" They laughed like schoolgirls and started arguing over Nona's flowered purse.

May said, "You should of let me buy it. I saw it first!"

"Not when it goes so perfect with my hat," Nona answered.

"Oh, what do you know? Let me buy it from you."

"Uh-uh."

And they started fake tugging at the purse back and forth and teasing. But I noticed that as soon as they stopped pulling, Nona stuffed the purse behind her legs for safekeeping. Then she started stroking my hair, twirling it in ringlets the way my Mother used to do. Sister and the other girls came and sat down and John passed around a thermos of hot chocolate. Everyone was joking and teasing and I swear, if I had closed my eyes, I could have been on one of the front porches of 84th Street.

Eventually the man showed up with the key and lots of apologies and we went downstairs and listened to their meeting. I was getting great evidence. The Lawndale people were doing lots of good things. They were starting what we would call today a neighborhood watch patrol and they were fighting to get a Church with a gym to open at three so their kids had somewhere to go after school.

Throughout the meeting Nona kept patting my hand, giving us girls all the background, explaining what was going on. I needed an explanation when they got to the last agenda item - The Garbage Demonstration at City Hall. All it triggered in my mind was our front porch conversations - "Demonstrators! Troublemakers. Asking for it." However everyone had made us feel so welcome and, throughout the meeting as I said, Nona was practically holding my hand so I felt comfortable enough to ask some questions.

I don't know if you've ever had this happen to you where one conversation or one book or one movie changes your life. Well the next three-minute conversation changed my life around one hundred and eighty degrees.

I asked, "What are you going to demonstrate about?"

Nona said, "They make us live in filth."

"How can anybody make you live in filth?" I asked.

Nona answered, "Our garbage doesn't get picked up."

John added, "The Sanitation Department says they come in here but they don't. Someone's palming a few bucks."

"Wait a minute," I said. "How could they get away with that?"

John looked at me with disbelief. He said, "We don't have no clout. We're expendable."

All at once the view from this street was so different from our view from the el. My perspective was changing from people who didn't care or people who needed to be shown how to people carrying out their garbage every Tuesday night just like us only the garbage trucks never coming. The garbage trucks never came.

I heard May say, "In the lot next to our house there isn't any space left to put no more garbage." And it came to me - of course! Just like our fathers - the vacant lots were being used as dumps!

May continued, "I spend every last dime on garbage cans 'cause the landlord won't."

"Don't got to," Nona joined in. "He knows if we complain and move out, he's got fifteen more families ready to move in. With not enough places for Negroes to live, don't matter how many people he crams in there or how he keeps it up. He'll rent that building."

"You don't own your own homes?" I asked.

"Used to," Nona said. "I paid on my house for fifteen years then slipped on the ice, missed one payment and whoosh! Out on the street."

May leaned over to me and explained, "Nona she work as a maid but she broke her hip."

"They can't do that!" I said. "They can't kick you out after only one missed mortgage payment. You get lots of chances to pay. It takes months before they can foreclose right?" I knew something about these things because my Father worked part-time as a mortgage officer at Talman Bank.

"No," said Nona, "they can kick you out after only one miss 'cause Negroes can't get no regular loan. We have to buy a Contract for Deed from an individual without the protections from a regular bank. And the white man he knows it too. Sells to people he knows can't get no steady job. He take their down payment, their lifesavings, thousands of dollars. They pay on the house for six months, maybe a year, get laid off, miss one payment and whoosh! He take the house back, keep their down payment and sell it all over again. Take someone else's lifesaving. But I lasted more than one year or two. I pay on that house for 15 years. Had only two years left till I own the house, when the man take it back and all the money I had put into it. Still I didn't steal nothing when I left neither."

"What would you steal?" I asked.

Nona and May looked at each other and started laughing. "People get mad someone take all their money," May said. "I've seen people leaving those houses with the plumbing." May and Nona laughed.

"Why?" I asked.

"Sell it off, Child," Nona explained. "Piping, sinks, toilets. Get some of their money back."

All at once I remembered being about ten years old at Al's bar on Kedzie Avenue. We kids sat at the tables, drank Orange Nehi and ate pretzels. Our parents sat up at the bar. One night there was a man at Al's. He wasn't from the neighborhood. "A big shot" my Dad called him because he owned lots of real estate and he was talking real loud so the whole bar could hear him. "They don't take care of our places," he shouted. "I've gone in there and they've taken the plumbing, the lighting fixtures, every last light bulb and electrical switch. I tell you those people, they live like animals!"

My mind came back to the meeting with what I thought might be a possible solution. I was only in high school; I was young but I was a Chicago kid. We like to think we know something about the political ropes and Mr. O'Rourke, our precinct captain, only lived a few doors away. Plus, I wanted to help. "Well," I said, "couldn't you talk to your alderman about these problems?"

There was silence. Then peels of laughter. The Lawndale people could not talk; they were laughing so hard. Nona could see I was embarrassed. She was patting my hand, trying to gather herself together, laughing, wiping tears from her face. Finally she squeezed my hand and said, "Oh, honey, our alderman is some white man lives in the rich neighborhood next to the lake. We don't never see him."

So in one three-minute conversation I learned that the people on the west side didn't have the same representation as us, didn't have the same city services, didn't have the same chance to buy things and these houses we were always looking at to see if they were kept up were owned by a bunch of white guys! And the thought came to me, "Oh, my God. We are the South!"

Nona leaned over to me and said, "Want to go?"

"Go where?" I asked.

"To the Garbage Demonstration at City Hall. It's today."

"Oh yeah," Sister Tony said, "that's on our way home."

Now wait a minute, I thought. We were on the west side. We lived on the southwest side of Chicago. Since when was *east* to downtown on the way home? But then, I figured Sister Tony had never had a chance to march with Dr. King and this was a way for her to get in on some of that action. And the other girls seemed all for it - so what was I going to do?

John was saying, "If they say it is illegal for us to dump our garbage, we'll say it's illegal for them not to pick it up."

And I thought, "Oh my God! I'm going to an illegal demonstration!" So if I thought I was scared when I arrived at that meeting, I left there a nervous wreck.

We followed behind in the convent station wagon. They had about a dozen people for this demonstration and two pickup trucks filled with garbage. We got to City Hall and parked across the street with the blinkers on but the Lawndale people backed the pickup trucks right over the sidewalk.

They started unloading big oil drums filled with garbage and greasy, stained paper bags held at arm's length and plopped in front of the bronze door entrance, a mound of garbage growing in front of City Hall. We went and stood over by the trucks talking with the people. At first there was a carnival atmosphere, everyone was joking and teasing. John was unloading the truck, handing garbage down to people saying things such as, "Oh, this must be your garbage, Tom, got a Seagram's bottle in it!"

Then a white woman came up behind me. She must have thought I had just stopped to

watch. She said in a loud whisper, "These people! They live in filth! It's disgusting. And they wonder why we don't want to live with *them*?"

How to explain all I'd just learned? I literally started sputtering into this woman's face. "No, no. You think what your eyes are seeing is what's really going on. You think you have the proof. But that isn't the truest story." But the woman just walked away.

Nona who had heard the woman and, I think, was supposed to have heard said, "You know, Child, Hitler built those concentration camps with no bathrooms. He'd be showing people around. They'd catch some of that smell and he'd say, 'Jews stink.' He had his proof too. Some people, Baby, they'll just never see."

Then, Nona reached out, pulled me close and gave me a big woman hug. As I rested my head on her shoulder, I wanted to say, "Yeah, but, Nona, I hadn't seen either. I mean why is your view from the street and our view from the el so different? And why hadn't I known?"

May came up behind me and she gave me a hug too. "Sister and the other girls gone across the street make sure the car don't get towed. You go too," she said. "We'll wave to you from across the street."

"Yeah," Nona said. "We're going to be on TV."

I started across the street, got half way and saw squad cars speeding down Clark Street, coming right at us with their blue lights flashing. John was off to my right getting ready to make a speech; reporters held microphones to his face. But all the time John kept turning his head watching those squad cars.

He started, "The City Council had voted Restrictive Covenants legally restricting Negroes to two small areas of this city in which to live. Still today, on the west side in our neighborhood, 300,000 people live in housing built for 90,000. With so much more demand for housing than supply in the Negro districts, landlords charge three and four times the rent paid by white Chicagoans and for what? For dilapidated, dangerous, overcrowded housing!"

The TV crew finally got its lights adjusted. They looked like landing lights on an airplane back then. John ballooned upright, spoke in a booming voice, all the time keeping his eyes on those squad cars. "The west side is the forgotten stepchild of the city," he said. "When we can buy houses, we have to buy on contract because the banks will not sell mortgages to Negroes. We are charged at minimum \$10,000 more for our homes because there are so few places we can buy in this city. We pay city taxes but, as this demonstration shows, we do not receive comparable city services. Our streets and sidewalks are not maintained. Abandoned cars are not removed. Our garbage is not picked up."

The policemen got out of their cars. A few walked up to John, just ignored the reporters and said, "You and your group are going to have to leave now."

Over by the entrance to City Hall, the people continued to place their garbage on the sidewalk. I could see May and Nona and the other people still unloading the paper bags but now all the time, their heads were lifted, keeping their eyes on the policemen standing by their cars. Then it was as though everything began to move in silent, liquid-y, slow motion. I could see the demonstrators looking at the police, the police looking at them.

Then there were all these screechy, static-y sounds between the squad car radios and the walkie-talkies some of the policemen were carrying. The Lawndale people began to sing, "We shall overcome. We shall overcome." Then I saw -- half a dozen policemen raise their billy clubs into the air.

I ran over to Sister Tony and the girls. "But they aren't *doing* anything!" I said to Sister.

Next there was all this confusion as if some of the policemen didn't know what to do either. The ones over by John just kept writing tickets - for loitering or littering I don't know what. But the ones with the billy clubs moved their clubs horizontal and started to push, push, push at the people as if they were herding them together. But instead of pushing back, the Lawndale people did what Dr. King had taught people to do during non-violent demonstrations. They started to sit down and go limp so they'd be harder to move.

And I saw Nona and May reaching for each other, trying to sit down so they could be passive resistors too, but Nona had that bad hip so she was moving too slow. And some policemen saw them still standing and raced over to them, swinging their billy clubs over May and Nona's heads but they didn't have to because they were trying to get down on their own. I could see Nona and May huddled together, holding on to each other, reaching for the sidewalk to lower themselves down but then, they'd have to quick! Duck! Put both their hands over their heads as the policemen swung their clubs overhead. Holding onto each other, reaching for the sidewalk but then, quick! Duck! Policemen swung billy clubs right into their faces.

Then more squad cars arrived. The policemen jumped out of their cars, raced toward the people, circling them, harvesting their pick of limp bodies. A policeman at the arms, a policeman at the legs, they lifted the demonstrators, hauled them like sacks and tossed them into their wagons.

Sister's arms were outstretched, straining, as if she had to hold us girls back. She didn't have to worry. My friends looked frozen and I wanted to run the other way, be anywhere but there. Sure I was shouting, "May! Nona! Watch out! Get down!" but my face was flushed with shame because I knew that no part of me wanted to cross that street. Sister looked at us nervously. When I think of it now, some of these young nuns were all of 27, 28 years old. There we were - no permission slips; we weren't even where we were supposed to have gone. If anything happened to us, she'd be in big trouble. Finally she said, "I think we better go now." And then to make us feel better and, perhaps, herself feel better she added, "Don't worry. The Lawndale group's really organized. They know what to do during these non-violent demonstrations if people get arrested. We'll call John when we get back to the school."

I went to step into the car with the other girls but then I turned around on impulse just in time to see a policeman carrying off a limp body with a dangling hand, clutching a flowered purse.

"Susan," Sister Tony snapped at me, "get in the car. C'mon. We're going home."

Home. It was like being caught in a kind of bubble, a time warp. Even then on some level, I knew that as soon as I took a step in either direction I'd lose something. I'd never be able to sit on my front porch the same way again - I couldn't even tell the ladies where I had been. But I couldn't go sit on May's and Nona's front porch either. And I wondered then, as I wonder now, where is the porch for all of us to sit on, where I can hold the best of both these worlds - the love of woman circle I grew up in and the courage and the experience of those two women with the flowered purse.

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