

STUART DYBEK

Field Trips

We took two field trips in grade school. The first was a tour of the Bridewell House of Corrections and the Cook County Jail. The prison complex was on 26th and California, only blocks away from St. Roman's school, so, herded by nuns into an orderly column with the girls in front and boys bringing up the rear, our fifth grade class walked there. The nuns must have thought it a perfect choice for a field trip as not only was there a suitable cautionary lesson, but it saved on bus fare, too.

Filing from school at midmorning felt like a jailbreak. Paired up with pals, we traipsed down California gaping like tourists at the familiar street coming to life — delivery trucks double parking before greasy spoons, open doors revealing the dark interiors of bars still exhaling boozy breath from the night before. Some of the kids like Bad Brad Norky — already twice convicted of stealing the class milk money — were hoping to see various relatives who were doing time at County. Others, like my best friend Rafael Mendoza, were hoping to catch a glimpse of a mob boss, or a mass murderer, or the infamous psychopath, Edward Gein, a farmer from the wilds of Illinois who supposedly

cannibalized his victims and tanned their skins to make lampshades and clothes. Gein fascinated us. Some years later when I was in high school, I bought a pair of hand-stitched moccasin-top gray suede shoes that, when soaked with rain, turned a cadaverous shade, and my buddies took to calling them my Gein Shoes. That, in turn, developed into a neighborhood expression of appreciation for any article of clothing that looked sharp in an unconventional way: *muy Gein, man*, or *Gein cool!* At the same time, the term could also be used as an insult: “Your mama’s a Gein.”

Even more than the murderers and celebrity psychos, the main draw at County, at least for the boys, was getting a look at the electric chair. We’d heard it was kept in the basement. Local legend had it that a sudden burst of static on the radio or a blink in TV reception, say, during the *Howdy Doody Show*, meant that the power had surged because they’d just fried someone at County. We thought maybe we’d get to shake the hand of the warden or whoever flipped the switch at executions. But, if there was an electric-chair there at all, we never got to see it.

Surprisingly, the most memorable part of the trip occurred not at County where the men, penned in what the tour guide informed us were 60 square foot cells, mostly ignored us, but rather at Bridewell when they took us through the women’s wing. The inmates there, prostitutes mainly, saw the nuns and had some comments about being Brides of Christ that were truly educational:

“Yo Sisters, what kinda meat do the Pope eat on Friday? Nun.”

“Hey, Sister Mary Hymen, when I dress up like that I get an extra fifty!”

The nuns didn’t respond, but their faces assumed the same impassive, inwardly suffering expressions that the statues of martyrs wore, and they began to hurry us through the rest of the tour.

A hefty female guard rapped the bars with her stick and shouted, “Pipe down, Taffy, there’s kids for godssake.”

And Taffy laughed, “Shee-it, Bull Moose! When I was their age I was doing my daddy.”

And from another cell someone called, “Amen, girl!”

The next year the nuns avoided the jail and instead took us to the stockyards, a trip that required a bus. A rented yellow school bus was already waiting when we got to school that morning, and we filed on, boys sitting on the left side of the aisle, girls on the right. I sat next to a new kid, Joseph Bonnamo. Usually, new kids were quiet and withdrawn, but Bonnamo, who’d only been at St. Roman’s for a couple weeks, was already the most popular boy in the class. Everyone called him Joey B. His father had been a Marine lifer and Joey B. was used to moving around, he said. He’d moved around so much that he was a grade behind, a year older than everyone else, but he didn’t seem ashamed by it. He was a good athlete and the girls all had crushes on him. That included Sylvie Perez, who over the summer had suddenly, to use my mother’s word, “developed.” Exploded into bloom was closer to the truth. Along with the rest of the boys, I pretended as best I could not to

notice—it was too intimidating to those of us who'd been her classmates for years. But not to Joey B.

"Like my old man says, 'Tits that size have a mind of their own,'" he confided to me on the way to the Yards, "and hers are thinking 'feel me up, Joey B.'"

"How do you know?"

His hand dropped down and he clutched his crotch. "Telepathy."

"Class," Sister Bull Moose asked, "do you know our tradition when riding a bus on a field trip?"

"A round pound?" Joey B. whispered to me.

No one raised a hand. We didn't know we had a tradition—as far as we knew we were the first class from St. Roman's ever to take a bus on a field trip.

Sister Bull Moose's real name was Sister Amabilia, but she had a heft to her that meant business, and wielded the baton she used to conduct choir practice not unlike the guard we'd seen wielding a nightstick at Bridewell a year before, so my friend Rafael had come up with the nickname. From within her habit, a garment that looked as if it had infinite storage capacity, she produced the pitch pipe also used in choir practice and sustained a note. "Girls start and boys come in on 'Merrily merrily merrily . . .'"

Joey B. sang in my ear, "Row row row your boner . . ."

At the Yards there was a regular tour. First stop was the Armour packing plant where the meat was processed into bacon and sausage. I think the entire class was relieved that the smell wasn't as bad as we worried it might be. We knew we had traveled to the source of what in the neighborhood was called "the brown wind"

or “the glue pee-ew factory,” a stench that settled over the south side of Chicago at least once a week. My father said it was the smell of boiling hooves, hair, and bone rendered down to make soap. I’d once dissected a bar of Ivory on which I’d noticed what appeared to be animal hair to see if there were also fragments of bone and if beneath the soap smell I could detect the reek of the Yards.

We left the processing plant for the slaughterhouse and from a metal catwalk looked upon the scene below where workmen wearing yellow hard hats and white coats smeared with gore heaved sledge hammers down on the skulls of the steers that, urged by electric prods, filed obediently through wooden chutes.

Every time the hammer connected, my friend, Rafael would go, “Ka-boom!”

The steer would drop folding at the knees as if it was his front legs that had suddenly been broken.

“That has to smart,” Joey B. said.

For the finale they took us to where the hogs were slaughtered. A man with hairy, thick, spattered forearms, wearing rubber boots and a black rubber apron shiny with blood stood holding a butcher knife before a vat of water. An assembly line of huge, squealing hogs, suspended by their hind legs, swung past him, and as each hog went by the line would pause long enough for the man to slit the hog’s throat. He did it with a practiced, effortless motion and I wondered how long he’d had the job, what it had been like on his first day, and if it was a job I could ever be desperate enough to do. Up to then, my idea of the worst job one could have was bus driver. I didn’t think I could drive

through rush hour traffic down the same street over and over while making change as bus drivers had to in those days. But watching the man kill hogs, I began to think that driving a bus might not be so bad.

With each hog there was the same terrified squeal, but louder than a squeal, more like a shriek that became a grunting gurgle of blood. A Niagara of blood splashed to the tile and into a flowing gutter of water where it rushed frothing away. The man would plunge the knife into the vat of water before him and the water clouded pink, then he'd withdraw the shining blade just as the next squealing hog arrived. Meanwhile, the hogs who'd just cranked by, still alive, their mouths, nostrils, and slit throats pumping dark red gouts were swung into a bundle of hanging bodies to bleed. Each new carcass slammed into the others causing a few weak squeals and a fresh gush of blood.

The tour guide apologized that we couldn't see the sheep slaughtered. He said that some people thought the sheep sounded human, like children, and that bothered some people, so they didn't include it on the tour. It made me wonder who killed the sheep. We'd seen the men with sledgehammers and the man with a knife. How were the sheep slaughtered? Was it a promotion to work with the sheep – some place they sent only the most expert slaughterers – or was it the job that nobody at the Yards wanted?

"Just like the goddamn electric chair," Rafael complained.

"How's that?" Joey B. asked.

"They wouldn't let us see the chair when we went to the jail last year."

At the end of the tour on our way out of the processing plant they gave each of us a souvenir hot dog. Not a hot dog Chicago style: poppy seed bun, mustard – never catsup – onion, relish, tomato, pickle, peppers, celery salt. This was a cold hot dog wrapped in a napkin. We hadn't had lunch and everyone was starving. We rode back on the bus eating our hot dogs, while singing "*Frère Jacques*."

I was sitting by the window, Joey B. beside me and right across the aisle from him – no accident, probably – was Sylvie Perez. I realized it was a great opportunity, but I could never think of anything to say to girls in a situation like that.

"Sylvie," Joey said, "you liking that hot dog?"

"It's okay," Sylvie said.

"You look good eating it," he told her.

It sounded like the stupidest thing I'd ever heard, but all she did was blush, smile at him, and take another demure nibble.

I knew it was against the rules, but I cracked opened the window of the bus and tried to flick my balled up hot dog napkin into a passing convertible. Sister Bull Moose saw me do it.

"Why does there always have to be one who's not mature enough to take on trips?" she asked, rhetorically. For punishment I had to give up my seat and stand in the aisle which I did to an indifference on the part of Sylvie Perez that was the worst kind of scorn.

"Since you obviously need special attention, Stuart, you can sing us a round," Sister said. Once, during our weekly music hour, looking in my direction, she'd

inquired, "Who is singing like an off-key foghorn?" When I'd shut up, still moving my mouth, but only pretending to sing, she'd said, "that's better."

"I don't know the words," I said.

"Oh, I think you do. *Dor-mez-vous, dor-mez-vous, Bim Bam Boon*. They're easy."

Joey B. patted the now empty seat beside him as if to say to Sylvie, "Now you can sit here."

Sylvie rolled her pretty eyes toward Sister Bull Moose and smiled, and Joey B. nodded he understood and smiled back, and they rode like that in silence, communicating telepathically while I sang.

RICK KOGAN

Typewriters

In the beginning was the sound and the sound was with me and the sound was the sound of a typewriter...a sound that accompanies my first memories.

I was born, I was told, at 3:30 a.m., a bit before what I would come to know as last call, on September 13, 1951 and in a couple of years was living in an apartment in Old Town, filled with the sound of the typewriter.

My father Herman wrote books.

He banged them out, two fingers pounding furiously, books about people with cartoon character names and events often bathed in blood.

He was a newspaperman in love with Chicago and its history. Vividly, often in collaboration with his newspaper pal Lloyd Wendt, my father wrote books about that history and among them are "Lords of the Levee," the story of First Ward bosses John "Bathhouse John" Coughlin and Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna; "Give the Lady What She Wants," a history of Marshall Field & Co.; "Big Bill of Chicago," a biography of Mayor William Hale Thompson; and "Chicago: A Pictorial History."

He wrote almost all of these books in a small office at the front of our apartment.

So, I hear a typewriter and another sound too, the sound of parties in the living room. I am in the bedroom I share with my younger brother Mark and there we toss toward sleep knowing that sooner or later, sleeping or not, we will be roused from bed.

My mother would say, "Get up now. Get up and come say good night to all the nice people."

In pajamas covered with cowboys and Indians we walked down the hall and into a living room at once exotic, alluring and terrifying, a wild mix of people and conversations, ice cubes banging against glasses filled with booze and music pouring from the stereo, cigarette smoke filling the air like fog.

The faces that accompany this memory are many, for my parents had many friends and some of them were famous and some of them talented.

Sometimes I see James Jones, built like a boxer and the author of "From Here To Eternity," sleeping for a week on the living room couch. I see the dapper Willard Motley, whose novel "Knock On Any Door" had its hero Nick Romano saying one of fiction's most memorable lines ("Live fast, die young and have a good-looking corpse"), walking through the door and giving to my brother and me some silver coins he had brought us from Mexico.

There were many others: musician Win Stracke, mime Marcel Marceau, actress Nancy Kelly, radio's Studs Terkel, comedy's Mort Sahl...But most of the people who partied in that living room and, when the weather was agreeable, on the back porch, were writers.

The paperback edition of Nelson Algren's "Chicago: City on the Make" was published in 1961, a decade after it originally appeared in print in the October 1951 issue of *Holiday* magazine as a less-catchy "One Man's Chicago" and a few months later and longer in book form with its now familiar title.

The 1961 edition, which included a new introduction by the author and a handsome photo of him, was priced at 95 cents and was dedicated to my parents, "Herman and Marilou Kogan," though my mother was ever "Marilew."

It took me many years to understand the significant part that Nelson played in my family. It was not until I was in my teens that I started reading him. He was, by this mid-1960s time, just about done. His reputation was still sturdy, sitting on the foundation of "Somebody In Boots," "Never Come Morning," "The Man With the Golden Arm," and "A Walk on the Wild Side." But after 1956 he never wrote another novel. He turned out stories, poems, essays and journalism, many of them collected in "The Last Carousel" in 1973. But that was it. My father and Nelson's great pal and running buddy, the photographer Art Shay, once estimated that Algren's poker playing—"he was only a fair player but thought himself a master," said Art—cost the world of literature perhaps four great novels.

Art told me this many years ago: "Nelson blew a lot of books that we should have had. He blew them gambling and with dames. But what he wrote is a treasure."

He told me this in a most unlikely and dangerous place, standing exactly where Art says that Nelson

shared the “squeaky bed” in his second floor apartment at 1523 West Wabansia with French novelist-philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The place was dangerous because the apartment stood in what is now the right lane of the northbound Kennedy Expressway and Art wanted to take a picture there.

“I had a nude of Simone that didn’t get in my latest book,” he said. “It was too private to get published.” Nelson’s relationship with de Beauvoir was his most famous and ugly. But he had others. Most people forget, or never knew, that in 1937 he married Amanda Kontowicz. They divorced in 1946, remarried in 1953, divorced again in 1955. In 1965 he married an actress named Betty Bendyk. They divorced three years later. And somewhere during all this there was my aunt Ginny.

I learned of this one early afternoon in the early 1970s. I was driving a cab and had saved enough money to invite my aunt to lunch at the Wrigley Building restaurant. Virginia Cavanagh was my mother’s older sister. We called her Ginny and by “we” I mean myself and Ty Bauler (Paddy’s grandson), Johnny Pareskevas and some of the other kids I grew up with in Old Town. Ginny would often have us over for sleepovers at the apartment she rented on Lake Shore Drive. She would take us to movies and museums and restaurants. She would buy canvases and paints and take us to the lakefront and to parks and teach us how to paint, how to see, how to appreciate place. These adventures endeared Ginny to me in ways that deeply affected me at the time and still do.

I had not seen her in a while when I invited her to lunch but she looked just as my memory had her when she walked into the Wrigley Building restaurant.

We sat down and she said, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes," I said.

"Are you nice to her?"

"I think I am," I said.

"Are you nice to her after you fuck her?" she said.

Now, this was as shocking to me as if Ginny's hair had caught fire, especially since the word "fuck" was not spoken but shouted, almost a scream.

All I could say was, "What?"

"After you fuck her, are you nice?" she said, again shouting that one word.

"Ginny...," I said.

"You should be," she said. "You should be nice. Nelson Algren was not nice."

Algren was to me at the time a god, his words and characters shadowing all of my weak attempts at short story writing. The heaviest influence was his vision of and relationship with Chicago. I was drunk with the city and driving through its every corner day after day, and it was almost as if Nelson was sharing the front seat of my Checker cab.

And here was Ginny, making of this god-companion a man, and a bad one.

"After he would fuck me, he didn't say a word," she said, again screaming that one word.

Marco, the Wrigley Building maitre d' and a man of impeccable manners and great understanding in the era of the three martini lunch, walked to the table.

“Mr. Kogan,” he whispered in my ear (he was also a man of formality), as Ginny kept talking and yelling that word, “Please, your aunt is a nice lady but she has got to stop screaming. The other people are all looking. I think you will have to leave.”

They were looking, some of them even laughing. I felt bad for Ginny, object of such cruel curiosity.

“This place is too expensive,” I said to her. “Let’s go down to Riccardo’s.”

And we did, to the bar/restaurant where my parents had met many years before, and where Nelson had taken Ginny on a couple of dates, which she began to detail.

“Ginny,” I said, pleadingly. “Let’s talk about something, someone else.”

“You’re right,” she said. There was a sadness in her voice and eyes. “Just this then. He was a beast to women and I think he slept with me because he couldn’t have your mother. She was lucky.”

“Now we really do have to talk about something else,” I said.

And we did. Indeed, we never again talked about Nelson and I only saw him once more before he bid his bitter farewell to Chicago in 1975.

I was walking down State near Pearson when I saw him walking toward me. It was late, or early, depending on one’s habits: 2 a.m. He was wearing a raggedy Army jacket and had the look, as Studs once put it, “of a horse player who just got the news: he had bet her across the board and she came in a strong fourth.”

I stopped him and introduced myself.

“Little Rick,” he said, obviously surprised.

We talked on the sidewalk for a while. He asked about my parents. I asked about his work.

“You used to know my aunt,” I said.

“Ginny? That aunt?” he said. “I knew her. She was a little crazy.”

“Fuck you,” I said and walked away.

Ginny died in 1987 in Chicago. Nelson died in 1981 in Sag Harbor, N.Y. They both died alone, perhaps lonely. But they are now forever linked in my memory. There is no sound attached, no typewriter and no ice cubes against glass. But I see them dancing. I see them happy and I know this because they are smiling.

JOHN GUZLOWSKI

Looking for Work in America

1. What he brought with him

He knew death the way a blind man
knows his mother's voice. He had walked
through villages in Poland and Germany

where only the old were left to search
for oats in the fields or beg the soldiers
for a cup of milk. He knew the dead,

the way they smelled and their dark full faces,
the clack of their teeth when they were desperate
to tell you of their lives. Once he watched

a woman in the moments before she died
take a stick and try to write her name
in the mud where she lay. He'd buried

children too, and he knew he could do any kind
of work a man could ask him to do.
He knew there was only work or death.

He could dig up beets and drag fallen trees
without bread or hope. The war taught him how.
He came to the States with this and his tools,

hands that had worked bricks and frozen mud
and knew the language the shit bosses spoke.

2. I Dream of My Father as He Was When He First Came Here Looking for Work

I wake up at the Greyhound Station
in Chicago, and my father stands there,
strong and brave, the young man of my poems,
a man who can eat bark and take a blow
to the head and ask you if you have more.

In each hand he holds a wooden suitcase
and I ask him if they are heavy.

He smiles, "Well, yes, naturally. They're made
of wood," but he doesn't put them down.
Then he tells me he has come from the war
but remembers little, only one story:

Somewhere in a gray garden he once watched
a German sergeant chop a chicken up
for soup and place the pieces in a pot,
everything, even the head and meatless feet.
Then he ate all the soup and wrapped the bones
in cloth for later. My father tells me,
"Remember this: this is what war is.

One man has a chicken, and another doesn't.
One man is hungry and another isn't.
One man is alive and another is dead."

I say, there must be more, and he says,
"No, that's all there is. Everything else
is the fancy clothes they put on the corpse."

3. His First Job in America

That first winter
working construction
west of Chicago
he loved the houses,
how fragile they looked,
the walls made of thin layers
of brick, the floors
just a single planking
of plywood.

A fussy, sleepy child
could destroy such a home.
It wasn't meant to witness
bombing or the work of snipers
or German 88s.

He worked there
until the cold and wind
cut him, and he found himself
thinking for hours of the way
he stacked bricks in the ruins
of Magdeburg and Berlin.

Finally, he quit
not because he was afraid
but because he knew
he could without fear

his shovel left
standing at an angle
in a pile of sand.

