

Certainly not all the change that's taken place in the past half-century has been for the worse. Few lament, for instance, the disappearance of those WHITE ONLY/COLORED ONLY signs on public facilities. Still, an Orleanian who remembers the special look of Canal Street on Saturday afternoons in the '40s and '50s—a gleaming stretch of marble bustling with activity, the showplace boulevard of the South—can only wonder if Earl, for all his Luddite rhetoric, wasn't on to something.

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Joseph Epstein

I am old enough to remember being afraid of white guys. As a grammar school kid in Chicago, I can recall being afraid of a bunch of thuggish kids who went to a nearby school called St. Henry's, many of them working-class and with the reputation—justified, I suspect—of being Jew-haters. In high school, I remember guys from all-white Schurz High School walking around the track during a football game against my school, Senn, with chains wrapped about their fists, though the police were able to stop them before a full brawl broke out. After a basketball game against a now-defunct school called Waller, five or six of our team's players were caught, beaten up, and at least one sent to the hospital. Later, at the University of Chicago, a group of young Presleys and Brandos one night invaded a fraternity house I happened to be in, with no better motive than that of what we today call “kicking some butt,” which they proceeded to do, at one point banging guys over the head with beer bottles.

So the good old days were not unblemished. But what distinguished them from our days, and what can be extracted from all of the examples I have cited above, is that most violence had at least something in the nature of an explanation behind it. Anti-Semitism may not be a justification for violence, but it is an ex-

planation. So, too, are high school rivalry and, in the university incident, what I take to be class resentment. Motives, causes, effects, logic of some sort was in play.

Today so much of the violence on our city streets is without even the crudest logic. If one is beaten up or even killed, the astonishing point is that one mustn't—you should pardon the expression—take it personally. The violence will have been committed upon you not because of your religion, or your school affiliation, or your good luck (up to now) in life, but because you happen to be in the way of someone who is bored, or angry, or needs a little dough, or a fix, or is firing at someone else. As you hit the sidewalk, try, as I say, not to take it personally.

But return with me now to those milder days of yesteryear, to paraphrase the announcer on “The Lone Ranger” radio show. I am, when I contemplate my own boyhood in Chicago in the late 1940s and early '50s, amazed at the freedom with which I roamed the city as a child. Using the “El” (or elevated train), one pretty much had the run of the city. By the time I was nine years old, my friends and I went miles away on the El to a movie theater called the Modé to see an afternoon's fare of three or four full-length films, a number of cartoons, and one or two continuing serials. The only fear was that we might get on the wrong train. We never did.

By 12 or 13, I was a seasoned walker in the city. And one of my regular stops was downtown, in the Loop, at a boxing gym called The Ringside. I had a special “in” at The Ringside, whose owners, Sammy and Danny Spunt, grew up with my father on tough Notre Dame Street in Montreal. I sopped up the gym's atmosphere as a hobo might go after the gravy on a free meatloaf-and-mashed-potatoes lunch.

I still recall its smells of liniment and leather. I can hear the shuffling of black Hyde boxing shoes in the ring, the grunting of fighters banging away on the heavy bag, the rap-a-tap-a-rap-a-tap of the light bag, and the snap and whistle of rope as sweating fighters

Urban vice, circa 1943.



UP/CORBIS-SETTMAN

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did speed-up cross-handed jumping exercises. I remember Johnny Bratton's manager, a fat black man in a green corduroy jacket, black shirt, rust-colored hat, huge diamond pinky ring and another diamond stuck in his rust-colored necktie, a moist cigar plugged in his face. People in those days seemed to be sent over by central casting.

One day Danny Spunt brought me back to his locker to meet Tony Zale. This was around the time of the great Tony Zale-Rocky Graziano middleweight championship fights. Zale's hands were taped, he was in sweat pants and wearing a large leather apparatus over his privates marked Everlast. "Kid," I remember Danny Spunt saying, "meet the champ." Properly awed, I mumbled, "Hi, Champ." "Hi, kid," he replied, and turned away.

To misquote Jackie Gleason only slightly, "How sweet it was!" Today, no boy would be allowed anywhere near such a place. His mother would want him to stay away if only because she might worry about his taking too much secondary smoke into his lungs. Let us not even speak of the company in which her son would find himself. Let us not speak, either, of the Chicago El, on which, the last time I rode it, a year or so ago, I found myself winked at by a transvestite of *un âge certain*. I'm sure corruption aplenty was going on in that gym, fixing fights, drug connections, maybe worse, but none of it left the least harmful effect on me, because the world outside the gym seemed so secure. As for its good effect, it allowed me, at an early age, to glimpse an exotic scene close up, and the prospect was exhilarating. On the way home, I would pass Bensinger's Pool Hall, where one of the Willies, Hoppe, or Mosconi might be playing but where a 12-year-old was not allowed in, walk over to State Street, get on a Howard Street El, and think the world a very interesting place. I didn't have to think about its being a safe one. I already knew that it was.

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Ken Hamblin

On summer nights when I was growing up in Brooklyn, my brother and I would be sent down the street to Dissick's, the neighborhood candy store, to pick up the early edition of the next day's *Daily News* for my mother and my Aunt Merle. I vividly remember occasions when my Aunt Merle opened the paper to the center picture spread, which always featured a crime story, and called me over to impart one of her wise lessons in her West Indian accent.

"Ya see. Ya see how dem boys, how dem young black boys, get in trouble because dey don't behave demselves? Lord knows, you got to behave yourself." There would be a picture of some black scumbag with his hands cuffed behind him and his head hung low.

"Ya see, ya see how when de police got dem dey hang deir heads down in shame, how dey can't look you in da eye. Ya see how dey ain't got no pride." Then she would turn on me, wagging her finger. "Boy, don't you never bring dat kind of shame on your family."

The few times the police had to come into our house or

my mother had to walk down to the school because of me or because of one of my brothers or sisters, she was devastated. I still remember the tears and the stress that it caused her. I didn't want to bring grief to my mother, but being a normal kid I did have a couple of memorable encounters with New York's Finest.

The first took place when I was about seven years old. Edgar, who lived upstairs, was about nine. We both went to P.S. 41, and Edgar had this swell idea. He suggested that we go back to school some night and remove some items—clear-cut theft by any definition.

I had little interest in taking anything except these marshmallow cookies—some were white and some were pink, and all of them had coconut sprinkles on top. I was addicted to those cookies. Our teacher allowed us to buy only five cookies a day, no matter how many pennies we had. As a result, I was positive I suffered from cookie deprivation. So when Edgar suggested a surreptitious return to P.S. 41, I had a clear goal in mind: grabbing all of the marshmallow cookies I could eat.

As we left school on the day that I would become a thief, we stuck some paper in the door to block the lock. Sure enough, when we returned after supper, the door opened easily. We went directly to my homeroom. I opened the cabinet where the cookies were kept and commandeered a box of 200 Marshmallow Delights. As I headed for the door, I did a double take: Edgar was carting away a typewriter and an adding machine. At that moment it occurred to me that this caper could be getting out of hand.

We sneaked back into my aunt's apartment building and stowed our goods under the stairs. It appeared we had committed the perfect crime. In spite of my advanced state of cookie deprivation, however, I could not consume all 200 cookies before a green mold began to form on the uneaten ones. So after a day or two, my attention turned to the typewriter. I took it upstairs to my aunt's apartment, and I was pecking away when she came home and immediately identified something new in the house. Aunt Merle spoke to me directly, without a moment's hesitation, in her singsong voice. "Where you get dat?"

"I found it."

"Where you find someting like dat?"

Having no idea how to respond, I just kept pecking away on the typewriter keys. Before long, two of New York's uniformed officers were standing in the doorway of the bedroom peering down at me. My Aunt Merle, arms flailing, screamed in her thick accent, "Take him away. He know better than to steal. I don't want no tief in my house. Take him away. Take him outta here, officer. You hear me? Lock him up!"

Faced with my aunt's wrath, I did not hesitate. I ratted on Edgar and threw myself on the mercy of the cops. My mother and my aunt returned the equipment to the school and made restitution for the cookies. And I realized at that young age that if I was going to be a thief, a low-life, a brigand, I would have to leave home.

Adapted from *Pick a Better Country* by Ken Hamblin, forthcoming from Simon & Schuster.