



Video Story Transcript

Changing Neighborhoods

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fp6SNQkq5k>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

My family, we love to be on the winning team. Oh, we loved our sports. But no sport was watched as consistently, as, as devoutly, I'd say as religiously, as the Friday night fights. Awe, this was a great tradition in my family. My grandparents, who lived with us, came to live with us when I was six years old. They brought their tradition with them that you bet on the Friday night fights. Every Friday afternoon my grandma would show up with a hat, little folded pieces of paper, you put a quarter in, you picked out that piece of paper and have a number written on it. And that number stood for a round if there was a knockout in your round, you won the pot. You got the prize. Now, the Friday night fights in my house were very interactive, and I don't mean that the adults just sat on the couch and yelled at the TV once in a while. No, I mean, they were up on their feet and in the ring with the boxers. Swinging, punching, taking blows, I mean, grunting away, yelling at the ref of course. "Awe, he hit below the belt, the ref needs new glasses! We were robbed!" And then, ding, the round would end and the adults would fall back on the couch, in true exhaustion. My brother and I would show up with the those towels. We'd pat their head, we'd give him sips of water and we pull on their teeth. Now we didn't really know about mouth guards but we see the trainers do something with the boxer's teeth. And then, ding, they'd be back on their feet and swinging. And my grandpa he'd point to us kids and say, "You, you could be a champion. Boxing is the game where poor kids become kings." I loved those games for the fun, everybody was having. But actually, the game itself kind of scared me. And nobody seemed to answer my questions. I'd say to the adults, "Well, like, how can their mom and dad play the game if they could get so hurt?" And when the adults laugh and they point to me and say, "Because they're making a lot of money, honey." Well, we are making some money on the game if you won the bet, you know so that made some amount of sense.

Now all the adults, they also made side bets on who they thought would win the game. And the betting went like this. Vote for the white guy, if it was white against black. Vote for the Mexican or the Cuban Boxer who is brown against black. And it was two black boxers vote for the light skinned man. Now there was this lot of hatred where I grew up and there was... it was all for one reason it seemed to me because this is what I heard about all the time when I was growing up, that there was a fight over turf, a fight over our houses. All the time I was growing up, it was like I was surrounded by this kind of ambush talk, this war mentality. I would sit on the front porches of 84th Street and I would hear things like, "Do you think Halsted Avenue will hold. I hear they took 63rd Street. All the time I was growing up, white people who had lived east of us in what they called changing neighborhoods, flooded into our parish like refugees from war, exiled from their parish. And night after night we would sit on the front porches of 84th Street and we would hear these new arrivals weep for their old parishes. But how they missed their skating parties or their championship volleyball team, the Holy Name Society they belong to, the altar guilds.

And once in a while I would drive with the ladies downtown, to go shop at Marshall Fields Department store. And when we would cross that line, the colored line, from the all white neighborhood to the all black neighborhood. One of the ladies, who would come from one of changing neighborhoods, she might say, "Oh I, I wanta go see the old house and drive in. And we'd turn the corner, they'd say "Here it is." And we'd turn the corner and they would be... burnt out building, a boarded up building, no building at all. And the ladies would sit there and they'd cry and they'd tell it how it used to be in the old neighborhood. Their mothers, their dads, how the neighbors were so good to each other. Now, nobody explained to us why this had happened. About the real estate blockbusting, about how the banks had red-lined the neighborhoods. We never heard the reason why. It was just, this is what black people had done.

And you think they would they would have known something more about this. Maybe people didn't think it through because they would tell us how they get calls in the middle of the night. Before they move, people would get calls from strangers terrifying them. They'd say things like, "You better get out now. Get out now while you still can. While, while your kids are still safe. While you can still get a good price for your house." And people had pledged each other, this what they do in the old neighborhoods, when they'd say, "Our neighborhood is going to hold. If we don't move out they can't move in." But you keep getting these calls the night. People would sneak out under cover of night. They'd make their deal with the real estate agent and then they'd sneak out. And they told us how they would wake up, you know, one morning they had been talking just the night before with their neighbor over the fence about the pot roast cooked for dinner, about the new tulips they were growing, and they'd wake up the next morning and their neighbors of 40 years would be gone. I mean, they had just left and a colored family had moved in under cover of night. And the ladies would weep about this and tell us and we would drive on. But then they try to reassure us they'd say, "Oh this won't happen to us. Our neighborhood is going to hold. We love it too much." As if loving your neighborhood is what could save it.

And people did love their neighborhoods. I got to tell you, people would work all day and come home and wash their sidewalks in the summer. People would wash the outside of their houses. I'm lucky sometimes, after a day of work, I can get the dirty dishes out of the sink. But they would wash the inside and the outside of those houses. And how they took care of those lawns. I grew up with the Southwest Side of Chicago version of the American Gothic. Husband and wife standing next to each other, grass clippers in hand. Just staring ahead, daring a blade of grass to grow. And they would dig these moats. I mean, these bordered ditches around those lawns so that not one blade of grass would escape and make contact with the sidewalk. People loved those small bungalow houses, those postage stamp sized lawns. That said you were somebody.

That said you took care of your family, your whole family. Because not only were most of our moms working at home back then, but we had aunts and uncles and grandmas and grandpas all living with us. This multigenerational households, keeping an eye out for us kids.

The good news is I had hundreds of parents. Bad news is I had hundreds of parents. But we all belonged to in St. Thomas Moore Parish. We all belonged on 84th Street. But I was told some people would not belong. They would come and take our house. They would come and they would make us leave. Well, don't worry kids. Our neighborhood will hold. But deep inside I think we knew, we were only shadowboxing. Because deep inside, in the tone of that voice, I could hear that it was hopeless. Black people were going to do us in. It was a fight. It was a fight to the finish. It was us against them.