

STORY SHORT WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

featuring audio and video story excerpts with a discussion guide

City Girls: North Side vs. South Side

by Storyteller Susan O'Halloran • www.susanohalloran.com

THEMES

Segregation and boundaries outside and inside human beings. Discovery of similarities and common fears that turn to respect when you discover the whole story of a person's life and struggle.

STORY SUMMARY

Growing up in the 1960's on Chicago's segregated south side, storyteller Susan O'Halloran learned about different races and the boundaries that divided them from her white Irish family, especially from her grandparents.

At fifteen years old, she was selected by the nuns at her Catholic high school to attend an all-city interracial spiritual retreat that would last for an entire week on Chicago's north side. At the time, she wasn't even sure what a spiritual retreat was but she knew she would need her grandparents' permission to get on the bus headed north.

One night, as Susan's family sat down to dinner with their food separated on their plates the way they always ate, Susan told her grandparents about the retreat. They immediately began to worry for her safety because she would have to "cross the line" from their white Irish neighborhood through a black neighborhood to get to the retreat house. In addition, her grandparents harbored stereotypes about north siders including that they were all rich, they have "brain factories" (their term for colleges) and that they are a bunch of atheists.

Her grandmother took some comfort in the fact that it was an all-girl retreat and that this might distract Susan from the attentions of a Polish boy who had just asked her out. Finally, they consented and her grandfather sent her off with the advice to "make sure you push your button down" meaning to lock her doors when she passed through the black neighborhood.



Susan O'Halloran

Susan arrived at the retreat and met her roommates; a Polish girl from the north side who looked perfect and had packed three suitcases of stuff and an African American girl from the *other* side of the south side, rumored to be one of the smartest girls in the city, she had packed a big bag of books. Susan assumed she was stuck with the prom queen and the brainiac and convinced she wouldn't have any fun.

That evening she went down to dinner where big plates of food were passed around. The food here was all mixed together in new ways she had never tried before and she liked it. As they ate, the girls started telling stories and Susan started to learn things about herself that she "hadn't told anybody before". Later that night, when they were supposed to be sleeping, she and her roommates stayed up and shared even more about their lives.

Susan discovered that her first impressions about her roommates and that the girls who appeared so together and smart also had big struggles on the inside, just like she did.

It was on the spiritual retreat that Susan learned that everyone has a story. She discovered that everyone has things they like about their life and some things they don't like and in this way, everyone is deserving of your respect.

Visit www.racebridgesforschools.com to download the corresponding audio (MP3) and video (MP4) files.
Approximate Length of Video and Audio: 10 minutes.

REFLECTIONS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ABOUT *City Girls*

- Susan talks about how her Irish family separated the food on their plate but at the retreat she discovered she liked a casserole with food and flavors all mixed together. How does Susan use this example of food as a metaphor for other discoveries in the story? What is revealed by the flavors and the food you share in your family?
- Susan's grandfather told her to "push her buttons down" when going through the black neighborhood on the way to the retreat. When Susan arrived at the retreat she learned that her roommate Joy was from the same neighborhood that they had warned her about. What does this teach us about fear of the "other"? Are there lessons you were taught that you discovered were based in similar fears?
- In Susan's 90% Irish neighborhood, they talked about "crossing the line" to move about the city. What does "crossing the line" look like where you live? In the 1960's? Today?
- By the end of the retreat Susan learned that she was "completely wrong about those girls". Have you ever been surprised by someone you thought you had all figured out? What was that like for you?

**STORY TRANSCRIPT of *City Girls*
by Storyteller Susan O'Halloran**

Note : The transcript below of the video and audio story is not in correct text book English. It is a transcription of the spoken story. There are also a few variations from the spoken word. This text is for your guidance and reference as you start to study and think about this story.

Hi, my name is Susan O'Halloran and this is an excerpt from a longer story called *City Girls*. I call this excerpt *North Side vs. South Side*. I want to start with how segregated Chicago was in 1960's when I was in high school especially the south side of Chicago where I grew up.

On the south side of Chicago it was a melting pot. We all sat in our own pots and melted. Until I was 15, I hardly met anyone who wasn't Irish. Truly, not only was my neighborhood mostly white, probably 99.9% white, it was like 90% Irish. So, it was a very big deal in my freshman year in high school when I was invited to an all city *interracial* spiritual retreat.

Now, you know there's gonna be some trouble getting permission, even before we get to the *interracial* part. I remember the day I asked for permission, my grandparents lived with us, and sometimes it was easier if you ran the story past your grandparents first.

So, we were sitting at the dinner table and in my family, in my Irish family, we were kind of taught to keep our food separate, we would dig these big moats, these craters, into our mashed potatoes so our gravy didn't touch our carrots and peas.

So I kinda get the table and the plates all set up, you know, I just casually mentioned to my grandparents that I had been invited to the spiritual retreat, that *the nun's had picked me*, I thought that would sound good, that every Catholic girl school had to send one representative to this retreat and *I have been chosen*.

Now, that sounded good alright, they seemed to be going along with it and then I dropped the first of the very big bomb shells. The first bomb shell was that this retreat was going to take place on the *north side* of Chicago. Now, some of you might know about the White Sox on the south side and the Cubs on the north south there are big divisions, my grandparents told me for years that, the north side is a dangerous place to go.

There were three things about northsiders. First, they were all rich. Just look up at all the luxury high rises! I have heard for years about those north side people. Second, they were all smart, too smart for their own good. They have in the north side these things called "brain factories", which is college right? (We didn't go to college.) They have brain factories! On the south side we have factories, but they're *practical* factories, like they made steel or plastic or like I lived right near the Nabisco cookie factory, but on the north side my grandpa would say they have *brain* factories. They produce people who ask too many questions. Third, worst of all, they have on that north side atheists. The north side was full of atheists.

Now on the south side, we had parishes, Catholic parishes. But on the north side they have Lutherans, Presbyterians, all kind of churches not to mention mosques and synagogues and temples and according to my grandparents if you are not a Catholic you are going to hell anyway, might as well all be atheists - rich, smart, atheists. How would I ever be allowed to go to such a dangerous place?

So, my grandparents were going round and round about whether I should go leave home for a whole week (because it is my first time away from home) to this dangerous place, when my grandpa said "you know, to go to that retreat, she's going to have to cross the line". Now we are getting to the racial part because on the south side of Chicago it was all white on one side and all black on the other side and to get to the retreat, you had to cross the line into the black neighborhood, 15 minutes of the hour trip, to get to the Dan Ryan and then up to the north side.

Now, my grandparents were not quite sure if they wanna let me go, so that's when I decided, it wasn't exactly a lie, but I wasn't going to tell the whole truth. I was about to drop the second bomb shell that there would be students of color at this retreat. So, we were eating and finally my grandmother she looked up she was the first to fold, she said "you know it is an *all girl* retreat.

Ha ha! This had been my grandmother's main concern because I have started dating and I have been asked out by Jim Warpenski, a Polish boy, and my dad has said yes. My grandmother had lost their battle of permissions; she could not believe that her Irish granddaughter was going out with a Polish boy. That was interracial dating back then. But then she started to think that maybe this all girl retreat will get me away from the Polish boy for a week and maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

We were drying the dishes, and my grandpa he just pointed right at me and he just said "you just make sure you put your buttons down." Now whenever you crossed that line to go shopping at Marshall Fields downtown you crossed from all white to all black. Whoever was driving the car would say "okay kids, put your buttons down" which was a code phrase for "lock your car door, we are driving in to the black neighborhood". So when my grandpa said, "just make sure you put your button down", I knew that I was going to be able to go.

Now to tell you the truth at this point I didn't even know why I wanted to go. I didn't know what a spiritual retreat weekend was all about. All I knew is that whenever you get the grownups to say yes to something they didn't like, this could benefit you in the future.

So there I was the next Friday the teacher drove me across the color line towards the north side to the retreat house and I went up, I got the key and I met my first roommate Patricia Kowalski, a Polish girl from the north side. Ah! This girl was perfect, her make-up was perfect, her hair was divine, her pleats in her skirt - bam - bam - bam all in a row, I was dressed like in sweatpants and a sweatshirt, I felt like a complete klutz and she looked at me and said "are you Joy?" I said "no, my name is Susan". "oh...the other roommate she is like the smartest girl in the whole city, she's in middle school but she is like triple promoted".

And in walked our third roommate, Joy Stirling, an African American student from the other side of the south side, the other side of the color line. Well, we started to introduce ourselves. Like I said I have never been around any other people of color of my age before. Joy looked nervous because most of the African American students they had never been around with white kids, but Patricia Kowalski she was talking up a storm like she met black kids and Irish kids from the south side all the time. I thought it might be because of the colleges up over there, they might be used to different people.

Well, we started unpacking I looked over and I saw Patricia Kowalski had like three suitcases of stuff. I was like what is wrong is she going to the prom or something? This is an all girl retreat for two days, you know. And then I look over at Joy, and she's unpacking books, oh my god she's gonna study all week. I thought this is just great! I am stuck with a brainiac and a prom queen! This is gonna be a great weekend!

Well, we went down to dinner and all the girls were sitting at a long table looking like the last supper, with a couple of nuns in the middle where Jesus stands, and we started talking and laughing, kids from every ethnic group in every part of the city started sharing stories, and I started to learn things about myself I hadn't told anybody before and all the time these big casseroles of mixed up vegetables and meat and everything are going around.

Remember I was used to my Irish cooking where we kept our food separate where you know food was boiled beyond taste, but in this casserole, the food is all mixed up. You know how it is when taste something new, something you never tried before, so I tried it, it tasted good, then I discovered I liked my food all mixed up and that was the start of it, I kind of like things mixed up. I liked meeting different people.

And wow! Did I learn something as we began to share stories? At night we were supposed to be quiet, you know as soon as the nuns said be quiet, but everything became so much funnier, we laughing, stuffing pillows in our mouths, try not to laugh, we all shared our voices floating to each other and the shared stories of our lives and I learned I was completely wrong about those girls.

Patricia Kowalski, I found out that her family is in deep financial trouble, her father gambled, that girl was carrying all her things around with her because her dad would steal things from the family and pawn them. And Joy I found out her mom was really depressed and it made Joy feel like she was never enough, one of the smartest kids in the whole city, she didn't feel good enough.

Our voices would float to each other; I started to think here I was spending one of my best days in my life. I think it is a lot of the reason why I became a storyteller, because I learned that everybody does have a story. And as you learn more about them the more you learn about yourself than you could ever know when you started sharing those stories.

I think it was an important week, and maybe we didn't become best friends but I learned everybody has feelings and everybody has things that they like about their life and things they don't like about their life. And even if you don't get to hear somebody's story, you know they got one. And therefore they are deserving of your respect.

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