

3 JAKE

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BOSTON AND CHICAGO IS

vast: the former old, with narrow streets cobbled together from cowpaths, but oh so rich in history and culture; the latter brash, bold, with wide streets but none of the culture of New England. Sandburg was unerringly correct when he labeled Chicago the City of the Big Shoulders. Shoulders it has. A head, though? An intellect? I'm not convinced.

That's how I've read the situation ever since I moved here six months ago.

I saw it as a power move, from a smaller major city to one of the largest major cities. I landed my job at Highland Studios before I moved, of course. My official title is Assistant Video Editor, but I'm expecting a promotion and raise any day, dropping the Assistant along the way.

What I love is podcasting, and what I want is to be known for my work. My subject matter is mostly political: the struggles of people to live satisfying lives. But that's too broad a sweep. I need to find something more focused. And I'm hoping to find it in Chicago, City of the Big Shoulders.

Today I'm not on assignment for Highland Studios, I'm on my own, gathering material for my podcasts, which have made the Boston-to-Chicago transition well, my downloads swelling from 1,000 a month to 2,000 a month, moving Jake's Takes closer and closer to the top ten percent. I'm good. Anybody with an M.A. from Harvard *should* be good.

Every weekend, and most evenings as well, I go out looking for the right story — something that will satisfy viewers, encourage them to think, and bring in money.

The gun-control rally, the third I've attended since I've been here, presents more of the same-old same-old, two sides facing each other, one saying guns are the problem, the other denying there even is a problem. I keep coming, though, on the assumption that sooner or later something's got to crystallize.

A flash of color attracts me, causing me to notice someone striding down the center of Clark Street, scowling at both sides. Scowling at the cops, too. She's wearing black tights and a shimmering top of swirling greens and blues. Short brown hair — bad haircut — with reddish highlights. And something blue in

her hair. A couple of years younger than me, maybe. There's something sad in her face. I can't read what she's all about, but my intuition is never wrong: there's a story here. I raise my Sony camcorder and start filming her.

I'm intrigued by the weight she's carrying: by what her problem might be. And when somebody on my side of the barrier — that being the gun-control side, naturally — shouts out, "There goes Gun Girl," my attention zooms into sharp focus. *Gun Girl?* There's a story here, waiting for me to track it down, tease it out, shape it up, and present it to the world.

Moving in the same direction Gun Girl does, I wonder if it would be wise to jump the barrier to reach her. The crowd's large, but not so large I can't maneuver through it easily. Maybe 6,000, tops. I'm starting toward the barriers when I look into the face of the nearest cop, who's rhythmically thumping a truncheon into his hand. Cops hate reporters.

I'm about to chance it anyway when I hear someone shout: "Your sister died because we don't have gun control."

The guy who's shouting this is just two people away. And he's pointing his poster of Clarissa Pickett right at the girl I'm interested in.

I excel at high-speed deductions, and as deductions go this one's on a kindergarten level: the girl in the blue-and-green top is the sister of a shooting victim.

Gun Girl looks set to pound on the guy who shouted, but two cops step in front of her and order her away. I film her going, but then I approach the guy who confronted her, filming him as I'm walking.

"Hey," I greet, "Jake Terranova here of Jake's Takes podcasts." I slip him one of my business cards. "What can you tell me about that girl you just spoke to? Was Clarissa Pickett her sister?"

"That was Rowan Pickett. Gun Girl. Yeah, one of the victims was her sister."

"Why do you call her Gun Girl?"

"Because she's an idiot, a freaking pro-gun idiot. We asked her to speak at a rally after her sister and the other students were killed. And then, when it was her turn, she stood up and said that she wasn't for gun control, and that her sister hadn't been, either. Something about people needing guns to defend

themselves from somebody . . . the cops, I think. Something else about why we have violence.”

He’s not very exact, but he’s getting worked up and I’m filming away. Conflict makes good story.

“It’s the same thing all the pro-gun nuts say,” he continues. “Hey, is this going to be on TV?”

“I hope so,” I say. And then I turn to look for Ms. Pickett.

At first I don’t see her, but then I catch a glimpse of her multi-colored top halfway up the block. She’s standing on the base of a lamppost, looking up at the sky. I look up, too, increasing magnification and slowly panning the camcorder in the direction she’s looking.

A brilliantly colored parrot. Escaped pet.

Gun Girl raises a hand in the air and shouts up to the bird, which banks in its flight and soars in a wide arc northward, then eastward.

As I’m filming the bird pandemonium breaks loose and all the devils Milton could have imagined are unleashed here on Clark Street — the pro- gun people jump the barricades and rush toward us. Most of “us” rush toward them. Not me, because much as I’d enjoy smashing my fist into fascist faces, I’m trying to film the whole thing.

The melee simmers and bubbles for several minutes, until the cops push each side back to its own end of the street and we once again face each other across the no-man’s land of Clark Street. My camcorder finds Zeb Snoddy, the self-admitted, swastika-wearing fascist who’s in the news at least once a week.

What? I do a double-take at my flip screen, because she’s there, too — Rowan Pickett. Snoddy’s reaching out to grab her, but she arches backward, throwing an arm into the air. Self-defense move, probably karate.

An inhuman scream pierces through the crowd noise, ear-splitting to the extreme, and through my screen I see the parrot diving right at Snoddy. I go into 10x magnification and see blood spurt out of Snoddy’s face. I want to close in on that even more, but his minions surround and obscure him, so I pan back to catch Gun Girl.

Except she’s not there.

Nowhere.

I stand there, puzzled.

Just a few minutes ago Gun Girl signaled the parrot. The parrot changed its path. Circled around. Waited.

And then Gun Girl raised her arm and the parrot attacked Snoddy. Gun Girl is gone. Split the scene. I realize I'm writing the narrative as I'm standing there, using my grandmother's slang. But split the scene is just right for a bold and brash city like Chicago, adding flavor to what I'll be saying when I put this thing together.

Although — and I'm always honest with myself — I have no idea what the motives are here.

But I'll discover them.

I'm jostled and jostled even harder and almost lose my balance, but I remain upright and even manage to move into the street. Attracted by whatever's happening in the pro-gun camp, the gun-control crowd has spilled off the sidewalk and onto Clark. The cops keep trying to push us backward. Ever so slowly the street is cleared. And then, somehow, who knows why, both sides begin moving south. I shoulder my way out of the crowd onto the street.

An ambulance siren slices through the air. Medics hop out and within seconds they're carrying a stretcher back to the ambulance. Snoddy is strapped to the stretcher, a huge white patch covering his left eye. The ambulance pulls away.

The two sides are still moving south, but I hang around the cops. When the chance opens up, I ask one of them what happened to Snoddy. I mean, I know what happened to Snoddy, I just want to hear the official version.

He looks at my camcorder and assumes I'm media. Which I am, only not network media.

“Too soon to say,” he tells me.

“Did anybody see what happened?”

“Too soon to say.”

“Which hospital are they taking him to?” I ask.

“Ambulance will probably take him to Rush.”

By now the demonstration is at least two blocks south of me, the ambulance long gone. The cops are moving southward also. May as well head straight to Rush Hospital and see what information I can get on Snoddy.

I fumble for my phone, thinking I'll call Uber. I look around for a convenient corner to direct Uber to when I see her again. Gun Girl.

Once again she's half a block north, standing alone in the middle of the sidewalk. If body language is any indication, she's confused.

A good time to interview her. I slip my camcorder into a cargo pocket and head her way. When I'm within shouting distance I call to her.

She doesn't hear me. Or maybe doesn't want to hear me. I jog toward her and ask her to wait, I want to talk to her.

She tells me to go away.

It's then I notice she's had an encounter of some sort. Her tights and skin are smeared with red and yellow. Mustard and ketchup, looks like. Other wet stuff stains her. Coffee maybe, or soda. Gum wrappers are clinging to her ass.

Which is naked in places. Her tights are partly shredded.

She's not stopping, so I run up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. The next thing I know, I'm gagging, bent down, trying to catch my breath.

She hit me! Elbow to the throat.

Part of me admires the effectiveness of her move. Most of me is hugely pissed.

When I'm recovered enough to stand upright and breathe normally, Gun Girl is trotting down the steps of the El. I follow her.

When I reach the bottom, I don't see her. Which direction is she heading?

Think, Jake, think. Yes, south side. The students who were murdered while on a field trip to Colorado were all from the same south-side school. So I'm guessing she lives in Bridgeport, a working class neighborhood, probably a lot like Southie used to be in Boston: white, blue-collar, mainly Irish-American.

She's standing in a corner, away from everyone. I move to the opposite end of the platform, hoping she doesn't see me. Taking out my phone I check the news, which tells me what I already know: that Zeb Snoddy was taken away from the gun-control rally in an ambulance. Nothing yet about being stabbed in the eye by a trained parrot.

Ms. Pickett boards the El and so do I, choosing a different car. In the Loop she exits and waits for an Orange Line train. I do the same, standing behind a pillar.

She boards and so do I, again in a different car.

Aiming my camcorder out the window, I take some scenic shots as the El lumbers along, just in case I decide to use Gun Girl's flight as part of the episode. Catching a glimpse of color in the sky I rush to the front of the car, where there are more windows, and aim upward, zooming in on the color. It's the parrot, flying parallel to the tracks.

When Gun Girl finally leaves the train at the Ashland and 31st Street stop, I do, too, staying as far back as I can. We're in Bridgeport.

She turns west and I stay maybe a block-and-a-half behind. I've never been in this part of Bridgeport before. Some bungalows, more two-story houses. In traditional Chicago style each house has a one-car garage at the rear of the property, and each garage opens out to an alley that runs between blocks.

Something makes me look skyward, and there it is again. The parrot. It soars overhead, skims the roofs of houses, and then disappears from sight. Gun Girl stops to talk to somebody sitting on a porch. Then she turns onto the next sidewalk, unlatches a gate, and, I surmise, enters her house through a side door. I hang back, not wanting to get the neighbor's attention.

Gun Girl, covered with crap, is going to take a shower.

At least I hope she's going to take a shower. I look at my watch, turn around and walk away, giving myself thirty minutes to circle back, by which time her shower should be finished, she should be dressed, and maybe she'll be at ease, thinking she got away with the attack on Snoddy.

When I do turn back down her street the neighbor's gone from the porch. But I know the house I'm looking for.

I climb the front porch steps and knock on the door.