

The Spectacular Average

— AN ESSAY BY —

GABRIEL BUMP

The number 15 bus—the Jeffery Local—ran near my house on Chicago’s South Side. I would take it to school if my parents were unable to drive me. I would take it home after soccer practice, sweating and weighed down with bags. Sometimes on a Saturday night, I came home too late and fell asleep in my seat and missed my stop. I didn’t get my driver’s license until after I graduated high school.

Senior year, my first class wasn’t until ten in the morning. I would wait at the stop on 69th and Jeffery Boulevard with other people from South Shore: prepubescents riding to middle school alone, adults with briefcases and suits, mothers and fathers holding their toddlers’ hands, and teenagers with tired eyes and headphones on, like me. When the bus would come at last, late and crowded, we would turn up 67th Street and ride toward Stony Island Avenue. We’d pass the old men sitting on benches passing brown bags hiding glass bottles back and forth. We’d pass the teenagers, boys my age, standing on corners, hands in their pockets, looking out for cops. Those boys weren’t going to school. They would spend hours on those corners.

We’d turn north on Stony Island, toward Hyde Park. We’d pass the empty basketball cages, the men sitting on benches smoking weed in peace, laughing and waving at old friends driving past.

Blocks later, I’d get off, sing to myself, nod my head, forget about the math homework I didn’t finish.

I wrote for my high school newspaper. My teacher, Mr. Brasler, encouraged us to read local and national newspapers, stay connected with our surroundings and communities, understand ourselves in a broader context. Senior year, my neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhoods were frequent topics in the news for two reasons. First, at the school year’s beginning, local folk hero Barack Obama was running a close presidential race against

John McCain. His wife, the former Michelle Robinson, had spent most of her youth in South Shore, blocks away from my house on Euclid Avenue.

Second, violence on Chicago's South Side had spiked and reached levels unseen in years. There was talk of bringing in the National Guard. There were comparisons drawn between Chicago's potholed streets and the bombed-out desert plains of Iraq and Afghanistan. Local newspapers ran daily murder counts. National news organizations sent crews to report on the despair.

From my computer in the school's journalism office, I saw my home represented in two extremes. Somewhere in the middle of this dichotomy, there was me and the other morning bus riders.

There was Barack and Michelle explaining on national television how the South Side of Chicago had forged their spectacular selves.

There were photos in the news of police cars, ambulances, yellow tape, and family members hugging each other and crying for their killed baby, friend, big brother, uncle, big sister, aunt.

There was us on the bus going home.

I was an average student. I was a good kid. I rode the Jeffery Local, read my books, kept my hat turned straight, kept my head down, crossed the street if two young men my age started fighting. Once, I cut class and had a friend call the school and pretend they were my father calling me out sick. The next day, I was summoned to the dean's office and asked what I was thinking. The dean reminded me that my parents had raised me better than that. He was right. I didn't cut class again.

After graduation, I enrolled in the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

At parties, people would wonder what it was like growing up in "Chiraq." Were you scared? People would share stories about the time they got lost in Chicago and locked their doors. I would remind them that the president still had a house on the South Side.

Yes, there were days and nights I was scared. There was the afternoon, coming home from school on a packed Jeffery Local, when a fight broke out and a woman pulled out pepper spray. There was the night I came home late after working on the paper, went to bed, woke up, and saw there was a shooting overnight, blocks away. Someone had gotten in an argument on a different

bus, walked off at the next stop, turned around, pulled out a gun, opened fire into the large windows. If I lived two blocks farther south, I would've gotten stuck in the crossfire. There was the morning when I stopped by the gas station, went inside to pay, and saw a smiling man in a bloodied tank top, a bullet wound with fresh gauze on his shoulder.

There were nights when I'd stay over at my girlfriend's house without calling my parents. I'd wake up to frantic voice mails from my mom and dad. A teenager had gotten shot and killed. They were worried it was me. They had just wanted to hear my voice.

I dropped out of Missouri after two years.

After months working in a nightclub, I decided to go back to school. I was accepted into the writing program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

President Obama was preparing for his second election. Children were still killing each other on the South Side.

For a short story class, I wrote about a kid like me, a kid like most of the kids I knew, riding the bus and keeping his head down. That kid, through workshops and graduation and graduate school, turned into Claude McKay Love, the narrator of *Everywhere You Don't Belong*.

Reading this novel now, ten years since my senior year of high school, I achieved what I set out to accomplish. I wanted to show the Chicago not many outsiders understand. I wanted to write a novel for the teenagers riding the Jeffery Local with their headphones on, their hats turned straight, their minds on girlfriends and forever love, their unfinished algebra worksheets crumpled in their backpacks, their dreams about belonging to a peaceful world. I wanted to represent the spectacular average—the sometimes plain and sometimes harrowing journeys of all of us in the middle.