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BY RICH LEVY

When I think of the sidewalks of my youth, growing up on the north side of Chicago, I think of how regular they were. On the side streets of Rogers Park, West Rogers Park, Peterson Park, they were invariably of the same width, in the same relation to the curb, always separating front yards from parkway, block after block, regardless of neighborhood, whether in front of single family dwellings or apartment buildings.

I learned to walk on a sidewalk, and can still see my sister toddling down the street in front of our three-flat. We rode our bikes on the sidewalk, skinned our knees on them, played hopscotch and Chinese jump rope and freeze tag on them, red rover, Simon says, duck-duck-goose. Crossing the street at the end of the block was a rite of passage. Our neighbor Mrs. Goldstein would grumble and stagger by us, hobbling to the grocery store, bakery, drug store on Devon Avenue two blocks away, pulling her folding two-wheeled shopping cart.

Sidewalks in Chicago, at least on the far north side, didn't vary much. It is unimaginable for a Chicago sidewalk to deviate from its course because of a tree—not that Chicago doesn't have grand trees, but because the sidewalk comes first. People plant grass and trees in the parkway not because they own this strip of land, but because they want their street to be handsome.

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In the 1950s, the neighborhood school was the key to neighborhood planning. In 1965, my parents bought their first house, a tiny two-story three-bedroom mock-Georgian in Peterson Park, west of West Rogers Park—we moved about a mile from the apartment on Richmond. To the north of Devon was Lincolnwood, the leading edge of the vast network of northern suburbs.

In the center of Peterson Park sat Hannah Greenebaum Solomon Elementary School, kindergarten through 8th grade. This physical arrangement meant that no child had to cross a major street to get to school.

Our school had a safety-patrol crossing guard along the main routes—6th, 7th, and 8th grade boys and girls helping the younger children get safely to and from school, morning and afternoon. Carpools were unnecessary and unheard of in Peterson Park. Children ate brown-bag lunches in the gym, or joined a parent (usually one's mother) at home or work for lunch.

I was a member of the safety patrol—a privilege reserved for those who were both responsible enough both to do what they were told and to not lose the belt—orange, reflective, plastic-coated, buckling over the shoulder, across the chest, and around the waist. We felt important in our safety-patrol belts, most of which were new and gleaming.

One morning the captain of the patrol, a lieutenant, and I (also a lieutenant) had finished making the rounds of the routes by bike, and we were passing the time before the final bell, when we verified the last of the patrol girls and boy were at school and then we raced there ourselves. The captain had a handful of paper clips, which he broke in half, firing pieces with a rubber band at passing cars. We were all doing it and laughing—until one hit the driver of a diaper-service step-van in the face, and he slammed on the brakes, grabbed the three of us, and dragged us to the principal's office.

Terrified, I confessed, the others prevaricated, they were dismissed from the patrol, and I was made captain. To this day, I still don't quite understand how it all happened—but order was maintained.

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This spring I was driving north on the Hardy Toll Road early one morning, when I spotted two girls walking to school along the feeder road. It was a cool crisp morning, and they were wearing jackets and full backpacks—one about 14, the other 11. Sisters, I imagined. It was unusual to see any pedestrians on the feeder road, which had no sidewalks and along which people drove at ridiculous speeds. The girls slogged across the muddy front yards of the small homes, churches, car repair shops, on their way to Patrick Henry Middle School, at the intersection of the Hardy Toll Road and Little York Road. When I saw the girls, they had about a half mile to go.If there was a polar opposite to my bosky and peaceful Peterson Park experience, this was it. The girls paid very careful attention to wear they stepped, avoiding puddles and the edge of the road, no schoolmates in site. Of course, the school preceded the toll road—but not the railroad tracks around which the highway was built. It's hard to imagine a less pedestrian-friendly school location.

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