

CONTINUUM CHICAGO



Main Character

A Long Weekend in Chicago



Four days. One life. The city as your set.

A CONTINUUM CHICAGO BOOK

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Main Character

A Long Weekend in Chicago

A Continuum Chicago book · Chicago, Illinois

“Everyone is the main character of exactly one life. Most of us only notice at the funeral.”

A CONTINUUM WORKING NOTE

For the one whose weekend is being planned in secret right now, and for the people doing the planning.



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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note on This Book



THIS IS A book about a long weekend in Chicago, four days composed around one person, and about what it feels like to be that person.

We wrote it in the second person on purpose. Somewhere in here is a version of you: the one who always makes the reservation, gives the toast, remembers the birthday, drives to the airport at five in the morning. The one who has been a supporting character in a hundred other people's big days and has never once had a day built around them. This book is what happens when that changes.

Every Main Character Weekend is different, because every life is different. The one described in these pages is a composite, drawn from the shape the weekend tends to take, and from the city we love. Your weekend will have different rooms, different songs, different food. It will have the same bones.

Read it once, straight through, the way you would take a long walk along the lake. Then, if you find yourself thinking of someone who deserves four days like this, turn to the back. There is a page that tells you how to begin.



CHAPTER ONE

The Invitation



IT STARTS WITHOUT you.

Somewhere in Chicago, months before the weekend, someone who loves you sits down across a table from one of our curators. It might be your partner. It might be your grown daughter, or your oldest friend, or a colleague who has watched you carry a department on your back for eleven years. They have a coffee they do not drink. They say something like, “I don’t know if this is crazy,” and the curator says, “It isn’t. Tell me about them.”

And they do.

That first conversation is never about the party. It is about you. Where you grew up. What you ate on Sundays. The song you sing in the car when you think no one is listening. The job you almost took. The neighborhood you still drive through on the way to somewhere else, slowing down a little in front of a certain two-flat. The thing you say when you are proud of someone. The thing you say when you are hurt.

Our curator listens the way a good sound engineer listens: not for the melody, which everyone already knows, but for the texture underneath it. The hum. The particulars.

Then, carefully, quietly, with your people’s help, we go looking for more.

We call this The Quiet Research. Over the following weeks we sit down with the people who know you from every angle. Your brother. Your college roommate. The woman who has cut your hair since 2009. The bartender at the place on Division who knows your order before you sit down. Nobody is asked for a tribute. Tributes are easy and mostly the same. We ask for particulars instead.

What color was the kitchen?

What was always on the radio?

What did they order the night they got the promotion?

What did their father call them when no one else was around?

When did you last see them laugh so hard they had to sit down?

THE ANSWERS COME slowly at first and then all at once. People have been waiting their whole lives to be asked these questions about the people they love. Some of them cry. Most of them laugh. Almost all of them, at the end, say some version of the same sentence: “I never told them that.”

They will get to.

Eventually, of course, you find out. Some families keep the whole weekend a surprise until the car pulls up. Most tell you a few weeks ahead, with a card that arrives in the mail. The stock is heavy and the color of the lake in October. There is a small red star in one corner, six points, the same star that has flown over this city since 1917. On the front it says only:

You are the main character.

Friday. Chicago. We will take it from here.

ON THE BACK is a date, a time, and a phone number. There is no dress code and no itinerary. That is the first thing we give you: permission to not know what comes next.



CHAPTER TWO

The Test Kitchen



BEFORE WE TELL you about the four days, we have to tell you about the part you will never see. It is the secret of the whole thing, and it is the reason the weekend works.

Nothing reaches your weekend untested.

In the kitchen, a chef calls it *mise en place*: everything in its place. Before the first pan is hot, every ingredient has been found, measured, prepped, tasted, and set exactly where the hand will reach for it. The service looks effortless because all of the effort happened before anyone sat down.

We do the same with a life. We call our version *Mise en Vie*.

Say your grandmother made a pierogi with a sour cream and dill filling that nobody in the family has been able to get right since she passed in 1998. Your cousin remembers it. Your aunt remembers it differently. A neighbor from the old block on Milwaukee Avenue remembers the smell of it on Christmas Eve. So we cook it. Then we bring a plate to your aunt, and she tastes it, and she frowns and says, “More pepper. And she never used store-bought sour cream.” So we cook it again. And again. We keep cooking it until the person who remembers it best goes quiet with the fork still in her hand. That is how we know it is ready.

It is not only food.

If the song that defined the summer you were seventeen was a particular live recording, we find that recording, on the format you heard it on, and we play it through something with the right kind of warmth. If your father smelled like a certain aftershave and cedar and machine oil, we blend it, and blend it again, until your brother walks into the test room and has to walk right back out. If the corner booth at a diner that closed in

2004 was upholstered in a particular shade of green, we find that green.

This is slow, careful, unglamorous work, and it is the heart of what we do. It is why a Main Character Weekend does not feel like a tribute to your life. It feels like your life. Not a reference to it. A piece of it, handed back to you.

You will never see the test kitchen. You will only taste what comes out of it. That is the point.



CHAPTER THREE

Friday: The Threshold



THE CAR IS black and quiet and the driver already knows your name.

If you are flying in, it is waiting at the curb at O'Hare. If you live here, it is idling outside your door at four in the afternoon on a Friday, which is its own small miracle, because you are never home at four in the afternoon on a Friday. Someone has cleared your calendar. Someone has taken care of the dog. Someone has packed your bag, and it is already in the trunk, and when you open it later you will find they packed exactly what you would have packed, plus the sweater you forgot you loved.

There is a card on the seat beside you. On it is one sentence, in handwriting you recognize.

The car takes the long way in. It always does. Down the Kennedy with the skyline rising ahead, then off the expressway and east, until the city opens up around you and you are riding alongside the river. The late sun is doing the thing it does to the buildings on Wacker, turning the glass the color of honey. You have seen this view a thousand times. You have never once been driven through it with nothing to do but look.

This is the first gift of the weekend, and the most underrated one. For a few hours, nothing is asked of you. No decisions, no logistics, no small talk you have to manage. You are received, and then you are left alone to arrive.

Your room is somewhere high, with the lake on one side and the city on the other. It has been prepared. Not decorated, prepared. The flowers are the ones from your wedding, or your mother's garden, or the ones you used to buy yourself on the way home from a hard week. The book on the nightstand is the one you have been meaning to finish for three years, and someone has tucked a bookmark in at the exact page you left

off. The music playing, quietly, when the door opens, is a record you had forgotten you owned.

You will sit on the edge of the bed for a minute. Everyone does.

Dinner on Friday is small. Just you, and the person who started all of this, or no more than three or four of the people closest to you. It is held somewhere in the city that matters to your story. For one guest it was the upstairs room of the restaurant where she had her first date with her husband, thirty-one years earlier, reopened for one night and set with the same tablecloths. For another it was a table for two on a rooftop in the West Loop, looking out toward the United Center where he took his son to his first game. For another, it was a pizza, the right pizza, from the right place, eaten on the hood of a car at Montrose Harbor, because that is what she did every Friday night in the summer of 1986 and she had not done it since.

The food is simple. The food is perfect. The food has been tested.

No one gives a speech on Friday. That comes later. Friday is only this: you have arrived. You are held. For four days, you are the main character, and the city is going to act like it.

You sleep like you have not slept in years.



CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday Morning: The City Is Your Set



YOU WAKE UP to the lake.

There is coffee, made the way you take it. There is a note, again in a familiar hand, that says, Wear something comfortable. Bring nothing.

Saturday is the immersive day, the one people talk about for years afterward, and it begins outside.

Chicago is one of the great walking cities of the world, and on Saturday morning we give it back to you. Maybe you run the Lakefront Trail at seven, the way you did in your twenties, and a friend you have not seen in a decade is stretching at Oak Street Beach, waiting to run the last mile with you. Maybe it is slower than that: a walk under the tracks of the elevated trains, a stop for a pastry at the bakery your mother used to take you to, a sit on a particular bench in Humboldt Park or Wicker Park or Washington Square, where someone has left a thermos and two cups.

Then the car picks you up and the day begins in earnest.

What happens next is different for everyone, because it is built from you. We think of it as the rooms of your life, rebuilt and walkable.

For one guest, a retired schoolteacher from Beverly, we took over a raw loft space in Fulton Market and rebuilt, room by room, the places her story had moved through. The kitchen of the bungalow on 103rd Street where she grew up, down to the color of the linoleum and the calendar from the parish on the wall. Her first classroom, with the same alphabet border above the chalkboard, and on each small desk a letter from a former student, some of them now in their fifties. The dance hall where she met her husband, lit low, with the band he loved playing live in the corner. She walked through all of it

holding her granddaughter's hand. She did not say much. She did not need to.

For another guest, a union electrician who had wired half the buildings on a stretch of Michigan Avenue, we did not build rooms at all. We went to the buildings. A friend who worked in facilities got us to the roof of one of them, and his whole crew from 1994 was up there, the ones who were still with us, with a cooler of the beer they used to drink on Fridays and a set of old photographs laid out on a folding table. He stood at the edge and pointed out every building he had ever touched. It took most of the afternoon. Nobody minded.

For another, it was music. A woman who had sung in a gospel choir on the South Side for forty years walked into a small church on a Saturday morning and found the choir she had sung with in 1979, or everyone from it who could still be found, in robes, on the risers, with her place in the alto section left open.

The rooms are always different. The feeling is always the same. You walk through your own story as its main character, not watching it, not remembering it, but inside it. And at every turn, someone is there who helped build it: a face you have not seen in years, handing you something, telling you something, laughing with you about something no one else in the world would understand.

We are careful here, and so is everyone who helps. The morning is paced. There is always a place to sit. There is always water, and a quiet room, and a person whose only job is to watch you and make sure that what is overwhelming stays the good kind of overwhelming. If you need to stop, the day stops. It is your day.



CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday Evening: Glass and Music



LATE ON SATURDAY afternoon, the car takes you west.

We love to bring our guests to places in the city that have their own sense of time. Places that are older than the people in them and will outlast them. One of our favorites is the conservatory in Garfield Park, a great glass house built more than a century ago, where the air is warm and wet even in January and the ferns have been growing since before your grandparents were born. There is a room in there where the light comes down green and gold through the palms, and a lagoon, and a quiet that the city outside cannot reach.

Sometimes we bring a guest there to sit alone for an hour. Sometimes the people who love them are already there, scattered through the rooms, and the guest finds them one at a time, among the plants, like a treasure hunt. Sometimes there is music, a cellist in the fern room or a single voice. Other guests go somewhere else that fits them better: a quiet hour in a gallery at the Art Institute in front of the one painting that has always made them stop, or a boat on the river, or a pew in the church where they were baptized.

The point of Saturday afternoon is to set your story against something bigger and longer than it. Not to make you feel small. To make you feel held. You are the main character, yes. But you are the main character of one life in a city of millions, in a line of lives that stretches back and forward farther than anyone can see. That is not a diminishment. It is a comfort. It is what continuum means.

Then night falls, and Saturday turns loud.

Chicago at night is one of the great pleasures on this earth, and on Saturday night you get the best of it. For some guests that means a jazz room on the North Side, the kind of

place with velvet booths and a long bar and a band that plays until the sky goes gray, and a table right up front with a reserved card that has your name on it. For others it means a house music night, because this is the city where house music was born, and there are few feelings in the world like a room full of Chicagoans dancing to the records that came out of the warehouses and the basements of the West Side and the South Side. For others it is a blues bar, or a comedy show in Old Town, or a Cubs game at night under the lights with the whole section filled with people you know.

Whatever it is, it is the night you would have picked for yourself if anyone had ever asked. Someone asked. Someone listened.

At some point in the evening, the band will play a song. You will know the song. It will be the right recording, in the right key, at the right tempo. And someone will be standing next to you who was there the first time you heard it.

That is all we will say about Saturday night.



CHAPTER SIX

Sunday: The Long Table



SUNDAY BEGINS SLOWLY, as Sundays should.

You sleep late. You eat breakfast in a robe. Perhaps there is a short walk, or a swim, or a massage, or an hour with a book by the window. In the early afternoon, a small team arrives to help you get ready, if you would like that. Your clothes for the evening have been chosen, or rather, they have been found: the kind of thing you would pick for yourself on your best day, fitted and pressed and waiting.

Then the car comes one last time, and it takes you to The Long Table.

The Long Table is the center of the weekend, and it is exactly what it sounds like. A single long table, set somewhere beautiful in the city. We have set it in a restored ballroom, in a glass-walled room above the river, in a greenhouse, in a warehouse on the Southwest Side where a guest's father once worked the line, in a backyard in Bridgeport under string lights. The place is chosen because it means something. The table is long enough for everyone.

And everyone is there.

This is the moment families plan for. The people from every chapter of your life, gathered in one room for the first time. Your childhood best friend. Your college teammates. The mentor who took a chance on you. Your children, your nieces and nephews, the neighbor from the old block, the coworker who became family. Some of them have flown in. Some of them you have not seen in twenty years. Some of them have never met each other, and by the end of the night they will be trading phone numbers.

They stand when you walk in. You will not be ready for that. Nobody is.

Then everyone sits, and the food begins to arrive, and you realize that every dish is a chapter. The first course is something from your childhood kitchen, tested until it tastes exactly right. The second is the meal from your first real date, or the dish you ordered in Italy on your honeymoon, or the Italian beef from the stand you went to after every high school game. There is a dessert your mother made. There is a drink, the one you always order, made the way you like it. The menu card at your place tells the story of each course in one or two lines. Most people keep that card for the rest of their lives.

And then, between the courses, people stand up and talk.

This is the part that changes people. At almost every funeral in the world, someone stands up and says the things that should have been said years before. Beautiful, true things. Things the person in the casket would have given anything to hear. At The Long Table, we move those words forward. They are said now, out loud, to your face, while you are here to receive them.

The speeches are not long. We help people write them, if they want help, and we help them keep them short. They are particular, because the research made them particular. Nobody says “she was always there for everyone.” They say, “In 1997, when my car broke down on the Dan Ryan at two in the morning, you drove forty minutes in your pajamas, and you never once brought it up again.” They say, “You taught me how to shake a hand.” They say, “I have never told you this, but I named my daughter after you.” They say the thing they have never said. And you sit there and hear it.

Nobody makes it through dry. That is fine. There are handkerchiefs at every place setting, and they are the good kind.

When the speeches are finished, someone will hand you a glass and the room will go quiet, and it will be your turn, if you want it. You do not have to say anything. Most people do. What they say is almost never long, and it is almost always the truest thing they have ever said out loud.

Then the music starts again, and the table becomes a party, and the party goes late.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday: The Fourth Morning



ON MONDAY THE city is back at work, and you are not.

Someone wakes you early, gently, if you have asked them to. The car takes you south along Lake Shore Drive while the sky is still dark blue, down to a point of land that reaches out into the water on the South Side, a place built of limestone blocks where the whole skyline lines up to the north and the lake stretches east to the edge of the world. Or it takes you somewhere else that is yours: a pier, a beach, a quiet stretch of park, the end of a certain street.

You sit on the rocks with a coffee and a blanket. One or two of your people sit with you, or no one does, whichever you prefer. And the sun comes up over Lake Michigan.

We are not going to describe this part. Some things should not be described in advance.

When you come back, there is breakfast, and then there is a quiet hour in which we place something in your hands. It is a box, and in it is The Archive.

The Archive is everything we gathered in the research and everything we captured across the four days, composed into something you can keep. The recordings of every speech at The Long Table. The letters. The photographs. The stories your people told us in the quiet research, transcribed and edited and bound. The recipes, as tested, written out so that the next generation can cook them right. The playlist of the weekend. The menu card. A short film, if you want one. It is held for you privately, under secure, access-controlled retention, for as long as your family wants it held, and not a day longer.

Most guests do not open it right away. They hold it. They take it home.

Then the car takes you back to your life. The same streets, the same city, the same calendar waiting for you on Tuesday morning. Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. You know now, in your body and not just in theory, what you have meant to the people around you. You have heard it. You were there.

We call this leaving with the high-water mark on you. It stays.



CHAPTER EIGHT

After: The Guest of Honor



EVERY GUEST ON our podcast has heard their own eulogy and lived to tell about it.

The Guest of Honor is where our past main characters, and sometimes the families who conspired with us, sit down and talk about their four days. What they suspected. What surprised them. The moment that undid them. What it does to a person to hear the whole shape of their life reflected back while their heart is still keeping time.

We started the show because the most common thing guests say to us, on the fourth morning, is some version of: “Everyone should get this.” We agree. Not everyone will get four days in Chicago with a long table and a sunrise. But everyone deserves to hear, while they are still here, the things that are usually saved for later.

So if you take one thing from this book, let it be this. You do not need us to begin. Tonight, or tomorrow, call someone. Tell them the particular thing. The drive on the Dan Ryan in your pajamas. The handshake. The name you gave your daughter. Say it to their face, while they are here to hear it.

And if you want to give someone the whole weekend, we are here.



The Weekend at a Glance



BEFORE

The Quiet Research

Conversations with the people who know the guest of honor from every angle. Particulars, not tributes. Completely discreet.

BEFORE

The Test Kitchen

Every dish, song, scent, and room rehearsed against living memory until it is exactly right.

FRIDAY

The Threshold

Private car. The long way in along the river. A prepared room above the lake. A small dinner somewhere that matters.

SATURDAY

The City Is Your Set

Morning on the lakefront. The rooms of your life, rebuilt and walkable. An afternoon under glass. A Chicago night, chosen for you by the people who know you best.

SUNDAY

The Long Table

Everyone from every chapter, gathered in one room. Every course a chapter of your life. The words usually saved for later, said now.

MONDAY

The Fourth Morning

Sunrise over Lake Michigan. The Archive placed in your hands. Home, with the high-water mark on you.



Questions People Ask



Who is it for?

Anyone who has spent their life making other people feel celebrated. Milestone birthdays, retirements, anniversaries, recoveries, a diagnosis that has made the time feel precious, or no reason at all except that it is time.

Who books it?

Usually someone who loves the guest of honor: a spouse, a child, a group of friends, a company honoring a leader. Sometimes the guest books it for themselves. That is allowed, and we think it is brave.

Does it have to be a surprise?

No. Some families keep it a secret until the car arrives. Most tell the guest a few weeks ahead. We will help you decide.

How far ahead should we plan?

The Quiet Research and the Test Kitchen take time. Three to six months is ideal. We can work faster when a family needs us to.

What if the guest has limited mobility or health concerns?

Every weekend is paced to its person. We plan around energy, access, and care from the first conversation, and there is always a quiet room and a person whose only job is the guest's comfort.

Does it have to be four days, or in Chicago?

Chicago is our home and our favorite set. The long weekend is our signature, because it gives the story room to breathe. We are happy to talk about other shapes.

What happens to everything you learn about us?

It is held privately, encrypted and access-controlled, and kept only as long as your family wishes. Discretion is not a courtesy here. It is the craft.



How to Begin



EVERY WEEKEND BEGINS with a single, unhurried conversation. There is no form to fill out and nothing to prepare. Just tell us about the person.

Continuum Chicago
chris@continuumchicago.com
continuumchicago.com

If the weekend is a surprise, it stays one. Discretion from the first note.



*Most people receive their finest hour
after they are gone.*

We moved it forward.



Main Character follows one guest of honor through a Continuum
Chicago long weekend: the quiet research, the test kitchen, a Friday
arrival along the river, a Saturday spent inside the rooms of a life,
a Sunday at The Long Table, and a Monday sunrise over Lake Michigan.

CONTINUUM CHICAGO

chris@continuumchicago.com · continuumchicago.com