

Curb Appeal

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First Place Winner

In 1950, for the first time in U.S. history, more people lived in the suburbs than anywhere else. In 1950, if we had existed back then, my family couldn't have lived in the suburbs if we'd wanted to. Neighborhoods were still segregated. Today, though, I step out of my house, and the view reminds me of a movie set. Pristinely manicured lawns, prim mailboxes standing tall, and sunlight hitting the sidewalks at just the right angle through the sweeping branches of trees. I look around for hidden cameras or a partition of some sort to show me where this utopian world ends. I imagine that if I nudged my neighbor's house, it would fall like cardboard, the façade tumbling down with it.

Surrounded by swampland, my suburban hometown rests in the midst of the Florida Everglades. My mom used to tell me that the houses in our neighborhood were built on Indian burial grounds. I once read somewhere that the plains on which we live were formerly used for canoe travel and small

encampments by a number of tribes. We can't know for sure. Sometimes, though, I'm haunted by the restless souls of the natives buried under concrete and green grass, brick and flowerbeds.

There are the obvious benefits of suburban life. Many of them revolve around children. Parents can send their kids around the corner to top-notch schools without worrying about them being mugged on the way home. Kids can frolic outside into the wee hours of the twilight, feeling like they own the town with zero concern for danger. You might notice a pattern of incentives here—an unparalleled promise of security. Nevertheless, it is a joke. Suburbia convinces us that we are safe, protected behind our white picket fences, cushioning us from the world at large. Yet anyone who lies in bed at night and lets their mind run wild knows that greater terrors lurk beyond, that the curb appeal is powerless.

Something about suburbia has always felt off. In Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, five teenage sisters take their lives over the course of the novel. The reason? Untold. There is a pervasive sense, however, that an omen

lies in the peculiar ordinary of their suburban town. Like bystanders with imaginary bags of popcorn, the neighbors watch silently from a safe distance as life in the Lisbon household starts to tear at the seams. Inevitably, we are led to believe that the mundane, unseen horror of the cookie-cutter houses and the unpolluted air begins to choke the girls, draining them of their will to live. Right after the death of his first daughter, Mr. Lisbon emerges anew. He strings Christmas lights as if the superficial glimmer of the holiday season could brighten the dark void of a neighborhood tragedy. If the community is properly decked out in good tradition, then the storms brewing behind closed doors can be locked away. The quaking of the bricks can be ignored out of a combination of both courtesy and willful ignorance.

This compartmentalization ignites a deeply American sentiment of the divided indivisible. Such a paradox is found in the separation of the nonurban from the urban, the well off from the less so, the aestheticism from the asphalt. With two world wars behind them, Americans of the mid-20th century sought suburban stability. Their eyes longed for a reprieve from war-

torn imagery, so they turned instead to well-kept gardens and open spaces. Levittown, a suburban legend, was a post-war planned community established in Nassau County, Long Island by entrepreneur Abraham Levitt and his two sons. It was a paradigm of homogeneity, from the identical houses set along delicately winding roads to their all-white inhabitants. Governed by miscellaneous conservative rules, Levittown jumpstarted the era of the homeowner's association and the picture-perfect idealism of suburbia that has been memorialized in film and TV.

In spite of the veneer of tranquility, a war of ethics was raging in Levittown. Although housing discrimination was ruled unconstitutional in 1947, the Levitt's still refused to sell houses to African American buyers, resulting in the most populated all-white community in the United States by 1953. Even when the discriminatory clause was removed from the lease itself, the practice of racism continued with the rejection of prospective black buyers. In 1957, William and Daisy Myers moved into Levittown along with their young children. As the first African American residents, only to be plagued by

harassment. For white homeowners across the country, integration represented the dreaded socialism or, worse, a sharp decline in property value.

As the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties erupted, people were able to retreat to their idyllic homes, imagining that a landscape of such immaculacy could never belie deep-seated racial and political strife. But it surely existed. The whir of lawnmowers and the chirping of birds camouflaged the cries of the oppressed only just enough for them to fade in the whistle of the wind. The seamless streets with their papier-mâché houses were little more than emotional anesthetic. Deprived of an education, my dad's mother was a maid in one of these houses, and I imagine her longing to take the neighborhood in her hands and crumble it up. I think of her inhabiting a world that was not her own for hours each day, taunted by tidy trim and awnings, brightly colored paint that looked nothing like how she felt.

Even today, as we absorb the news and current events, it gets filtered through screens and drywall. Injustice in the Middle East, chaos in Ferguson, a hometown murder—we shake, we cry, and then we look at our pristine

surroundings and forget. Like in the 1963 song by Malvina Reynolds, we sit in our “little boxes,” in our little box of a community, the outside world merely a whisper. Something looms beneath the pretty exterior, but it is a word we can’t pronounce. When I look down my road at night, all the rooms glowing golden in the dusky evening, I see countless little galaxies stretching in front of me, people orbiting around their lives, oblivious to the lights flickering beyond.

One of my best friends lives on a similar suburban road not far from my own. I used to dog-sit for her family when they were out of town, extracting the house key from underneath their cheery doormat. My friend was also Jewish, and she was secretly dating a black guy. Her parents fawned over me. Her mom baked me banana bread. Her dad called me “The Good Influence.” I went on vacations with them to their house in the mountains of North Carolina. I attended her bat mitzvah in middle school and watched her become a young woman. Essentially, her parents treated me like an honorary daughter of their own. My friend managed to keep her boyfriend a secret for

a year and a half. It wasn't even as if her parents were extremely conservative people. Somehow, though, I was permitted the key to their world, and he was not. When my friend's parents finally found out, they were angry in a controlled way, the dull pain of hushed disapproval. I shifted in my seat when they discussed him in front of me, my ears bleeding from all the words that were politely left unsaid.

But sometimes, the words are said—just coated in sugar. I was at a party one time when a guy sauntered over to me, handing me a drink with a smile on his face. “You’re really beautiful for an African American girl,” he said. An involuntary “thank you” fell out of my mouth and broke on the hardwood floor. I stood frozen in flattered confusion as his smile never faltered. It was an insult buried in a compliment. It was knives wrapped in a bouquet of euphemisms. I tasted candy but with an acid core. When I think of the suburbs, I think of that. It was impossible then to explain why that incident made me cringe; the same way it’s impossible to explain the feeling in the pit of my stomach when I stare at those perfect lines of houses.

Within the landscaped optimism of the suburbs, there is a dormant sense of aimlessness, a jaded mediocrity. In Arcade Fire's song "The Suburbs," singer Win Butler laments "But by the time the first bombs fell/ we were already bored/ we were already, already bored." Suburbia is a place where people are numb, sedated into conformity and apathy. It is driving around in circles down the same streets for the hundredth time. It is walking around the shopping mall without anything to buy, just to pass the hours. It is staring blankly at the television and feeling nothing. It is a giant societal shrug of the shoulders saying, "Welcome home."