CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Walled Off

BY ANN BRUNJES

When my husband and I moved to Bridgewater from Brooklyn, New York, so many people said "oh, how nice, to get out of the city. To be part of a community. To have neighbors. A yard. Your kids can have their own swingset." And a yard is nice; not waiting in line for the swing is easier for our kids; our own sandbox, contaminated only by falling leaves and not rat droppings, is a lovely sight. Few things are sweeter than a walk in Borderlands, or a swim at Horseneck Beach. We know we are living in a beautiful place, and we are thankful.

I walk through Bridgewater's common and down the hill on Route 104, past the two Federal-style houses doomed to be torn down for a new drive-through Walgreens Pharmacy. "Sodom and Gomorrah," my mother says upon hearing the news, a bit melodramatically, but I see her point. The common was once the place where the townspeople gathered, to market, gossip, and socialize; these two buildings reach back to that time. When we lose those houses, we'll have instead a drive-thru pharmacy, designed in part for the "convenience" of minimizing human contact. It seems we have come to the point where even interacting with the other customers in the drug store requires too much time and energy, exposes us to too many uncontrolled, unpredictable brushes with our neighbors. Is this where Bridgewater is headed? Is this the community where I live?

I grew up in New England, in Pittsfield, a small industrial city in the Berkshires. When I came to Bridgewater on my interview, the town felt familiar: Federal and Greek Revival houses, the town circling the common, the meandering paved roads following the Native American footpaths, ubiquitous stone walls marking lost property lines. Part of me hoped - believed, even - that those physical links to the past might reflect a sense of continuity and coherence in the community.

But after almost four years here, something is still "off" for me, for us. The yard that should have made us so happy is sometimes oppressive in its constant demands; relying on a car for transportation - I thought the MBTA was a cruel master-is a lesson in chaos theory; and community - this community that we were supposed to find in the suburbs - has eluded us to a distressing degree. I wave to acquaintances in their cars as they drive to work in the morning while I walk my dogs. I chat with my neighbor, also a teacher, also white, also nearing middle-age, over the fence about one thing and another. I gripe with the parents of my daughter's friends about school class sizes or about overdevelopment in town. But too often - not always, but too often - these contacts feel artificial, forced, and necessary. Outside of my work at the college, I feel a bit lost here in the suburbs. A bit at sea.

What is it I keep hoping for here? What am I unable to find? Is the torpor I often feel unique to me, or is it woven into the fabric of suburban life?
I miss passing the time with Earl, my elderly neighbor, while he watches his grandson ride his big wheel up and down the sidewalk. I miss the old ladies sitting on their stoops, commenting on my dress, or the weather, or my daughter’s rapid growth, as I walk by. I miss small, daily interactions with the newspaper vendor, the coffee lady, the token clerk, the man who sweeps the sidewalk in front of the library at the same hour every morning. A smile, a nod, a “how you doin’ today? Gonna be a hot (cold, pretty, windy, rainy) one,” repeated ten times during the day, from ten different mouths.

In mid-September in New York City, 1995, we experienced a fierce Indian summer. I am 8 months pregnant. It’s been a long, hot, miserable day. I don’t want to be pregnant anymore, don’t want to drag around this extra thirty pounds, this rebellious little body kicking around inside mine, a day longer. I plod down St. John’s Place, my street, wanting only to get away from everyone seeing me, wanting to touch me, or (worse?) ignoring my “condition.” Suddenly a voice pipes up from the buildings on my right, a heavily southern-accented, creaky, little old lady’s voice: “you look beautiful, sweetheart. Don’t you look beautiful.” I nearly weep with gratitude, with relief. “You sit yourself down, it’s a hot day.” I ease onto the concrete stoop, next to her lawn chair with its jerry-rigged umbrella shade, and she tells me about her babies and grandchildren, about real, southern heat, about working while you’re pregnant. 15 minutes later I get up, lighter and stronger, and walk the rest of the way home.

These encounters were so sweet to me, often because they were so unexpected. Community in New York — perhaps in any city, I can only speak of New York — comes together, unravels, re-forms itself in a different shape at a different time. It’s 15 people on a subway car concerned about a sick passenger; two women discussing their pregnancies and motherhood; parents chatting idly while their kids play on the swings. Throughout my day I would touch the edges of these groups, fall into one, fall into another, see one dissolve. There were of course more structured gatherings — our food co-op, my co-workers at NYU — but they never had the rich unexpected delight of those little groups I walked by and slipped in and out of during my day. Is this community? It’s hardly heaven; we saw ugly things on the street. One night I watched a man repeatedly slap his 3 year old child across the side of his head for an offense only that father could see; another day a man is shooting up heroin on the stoop across the street. My husband asks him to leave, and he is apologetic, sad, packs up his kit — but not until he’s done and moves on.

I do sense one thing is true. The place I live in is balanced between two worlds: one where neighbors act like neighbors, in the best and worst senses of the word; another like the world envisaged by the mega-corporations and housing development engineers, where every contact is tightly controlled, every interaction carefully screened for safety and personal gain. Maybe it’s the occasional tilt of the balance toward the latter that makes me anxious, and nostalgic for the messiness of the city.

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