1002 Chadwell Lane: Jewish Suburbia in the Midcentury

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Preface

Chadwell Lane, the street where I spent my youth, was an unassuming stretch of sidewalk and asphalt that ran downhill in a new suburb about twenty minutes from the D. C. line. Like so much farmland during the postwar decade, its subdivision had been leveled, curbed-and-guttered, and flagged "For Sale" by 1960, the year I was born. Standing at the top of the street, the view of its geometry of lawns and rooftops made it appear like a poster for Eisenhower's America: a fresh grid spread out in neat rows like the era's promise of new beginnings, of unrivaled and widespread prosperity. To this day, I retain a Polaroid snap of the place that—beyond the cloying distortions of memory—attests to how auspicious that atmosphere felt. Our subdivision and elementary school had been dubbed *Forest Acres* by an enterprising builder who probably never once entertained the irony of the name, especially after the developers finished their work of scraping the land. This was the closing years of the migration from larger cities to the formulaic thrift of the "'burbs," an era in which our New York cousins, cramped in their postal-square Brooklyn apartments, referred to as "moving out to the country." In speaking about our home, my parents never failed to mention that, the year they bought the place, the boulevard bordering our neighborhood was still a gravel road.

They had closed on the house that autumn after their second child made their small apartment crowded and untenable. Over the next two years, identical-looking young couples, each with an infant or toddler in tow, moved into the remaining houses just after the concrete dried. Although in the morning the settled neighborhood was busy with suited fathers going off to work, by evening the block was often serene—as if the families there had all retreated for the night. On summer days, sunlight reflected from windshields of Ford *Falcon* station-wagons parked along the street; looking closer, one could see groups of kids darting between fenceless backwards. At dinnertime, and then again at dusk, mothers opened screen-

doors to shout a child's name and call them home. Few parents gave much thought to someone harming their kids, and front lawns and streets remained, just as with their own parent's city stoops, an extension of the home within. After school, my friends gathered at our house to tease each other while playing hide-and-seek or monkeys in the glue. On June evenings, when a slight chill relieved the summer heat, we were allowed to remain outdoors until well after sunset. Running in the dark and shouting, or reassembling beneath a streetlamp's buzz, gave us our first taste of freedom. Under the night sky we all felt transformed—released from our parents' control, we became something new and unrestrained. And yet, surrounded by all those groomed lawns and well-lit homes, we also felt safe—a privilege of that time and place, which nonetheless ended for us just about the time puberty made us all awkward and nervous.

At hilltop, our street intersected Applegate Avenue, the main artery of the neighborhood. The road took a turn and ran downhill to end into Foxford Terrace, which reconnected to Applegate around the corner. This configuration made our street a superfluous route into the subdivision, and few cars other than those of the families who lived on our block ever drove down it. On either side, the road was lined with a neat row of houses in three alternating models: a larger wood-sided split-foyer and two different versions of brick-face split-levels that showed the roof peak in front or on the side. Each house sat on a quarter-acre parcel of land. None of the models came with a garage, but every home displayed a late-model, American-made auto in its driveway. The cement stoops of each front door were crowned by a gunmetal box with the name of a local dairy printed on the lid—ours had *Green Springs* stenciled in a stylized script. When opened, the boxes revealed bottles of cold milk delivered each morning. The two-story, somewhat larger designs of the houses suggested the development wasn't exactly a *Levittown*—but it was close: although plots here were more generous than their Long Island prototypes, our freshly-finished neighborhood was nonetheless built on Levitt's model: patterned, pedestrian, and affordable—but with one exception: when they were looking to buy, my parents had been encouraged to learn that the builder was—much to their surprise—reputed to be selling to Jews.

The collection that follows about growing up in this time and place attest to a now often maligned form of midcentury Liberalism as it came to influence my Jewish upbringing. That post-war turn in the

nation's social fabric—however regarded by either end of our current political extremism—shaped the ethical lives of many communities across America, including the assimilated east coast milieu of my youth. The events and individuals I capture here became conduits of new perceptions for me about religious, class, racial, familial, and sexual difference; more durably, they also made me aware for the first time of a uniquely human vulnerability I still see as beyond cultural or historical divisions. The insights I gained in early adolescence through family, friends, teachers, and many others on Chadwell Lane—into who we are and how we survive—were also neither finite nor complete; rather, they were the germs of a consciousness that has continued to refine itself into my sixth decade. Even now, the leap of imagination it takes to empathize with those different from yourself—to attempt to understand the gravitas of their difference without attempting to fully comprehended or control it—seems to me a sacred antidote to the tribalism that plagues us, and perhaps always will. In any case, I offer these pieces as reflections on my own coming-of-age stories of where and how I first learned attempting to see things through another's eyes is an inescapable step toward moving beyond the fears, estrangements, and hatreds that possess us all as a species.

Even at sixty five, I'm certain that respectful tolerance toward the individual remains sacrosanct; it is the necessary catalyst that disarms the tendentiousness of gender, class, racial, and religious hatreds and returns us to the humane. It is our great gift—perhaps are only gift—and echoes the Hebraic commandment of the *gur*, never to taunt or oppress the stranger, nor be cruel to the widow or orphan (*Shemos/*Exodus, 20-22*)*. Fortified by my mother's old-world *Menschlichkeit*, my early recognitions of this grew over the course of my life into a sensibility that eventually rivaled the religious teachings, social theories, or political allegiances that have passed through it since. And I didn't discover this oceanic feeling because of a rarified experience either: not from esoteric achievement, nor global travel, nor lived trauma, nor even something like abject marginalization as a Jew—although I've certainly withstood my share of toxic comments back then and since. Rather, what I learned about ethical relations and the efficacy of what is now often called *intersubjectivity* occurred inconspicuously on the bland suburban street where I was raised.

My parents had bought the second to last house from the corner at the bottom of the hill for fourteen thousand with a thirty-year mortgage. This was the penultimate decade of an era in America when wages

were keeping just ahead of costs for working and middle-class families—an era that has now been over for a good while. With the help of his G.I. Bill, my father finished podiatry (Chiropody) School at Temple in Philadelphia in 1957 and set up his first practice just over the city line in a place called Langley Park—now a Latino working-class enclave—from which my parents soon "moved up" and onto our street. Although he earned less than ten-thousand dollars annually for the first years of his professional life, our household was sustained by that single-income throughout our childhood. We never bought the best of anything and shopped for clothes and household items exclusively at *Sears* or *Montgomery Wards*. But even during those early years, our family was a solid example of the new middle-class, and we never wanted for much. By the time I was ten, we could afford two cars—usually Pontiacs or Plymouths—and went to the Maryland shore or West Virginia mountains for a week every summer. My mother had dropped out of her first semester at Brooklyn College when she became engaged in '52. After the wedding, she moved away from Bensonhurst and never returned to New York. Like most women of her generation, she had been raised to marry, bear and nurture children, and remain entirely domestic and thus fulfilled by being so. Every mother on that street appeared to have that same story without exception—to us, women seemed *to be* that social role and indeed take to it with a vengeance. Inside our own home, though, we knew our overweight, strict mother was often sullen—but from our innocent perspective couldn't discern why. We also assumed the slavishness of her daily routine—reprimands in the morning; prodding about homework; and her perpetual cleaning, cooking, laundry, paying bills, grocery shopping, and more—to be natural and without need of any assistance from our father. Our dad left the house six days a week at 6:00 am sharp to beat traffic before any of us were awake; on Sundays he read the paper after breakfast and later watched the local pro-football game, the outcome of which affected his mood for the remainder of the day; when his team lost, we all knew this signaled the close of his weekend persona. During fall Sundays without a game, however, he often found a second-wind to take us for "a ride in the country" to buy cider and fruit from roadside stands, where we all noticed how unusually friendly he was with the locals. On occasion, he'd prepare Sunday dinner—and because he was just a better cook than our mother—we'd relish his special marinated steaks charred on our *hibachi* grill.

During my earliest years, the neighborhood seemed relatively untouched by the conflict in Vietnam, or the first Catholic president, or the Cuban missile-crisis and Cold War, Feminist activities, or even the decade-old Civil Rights movement. Those events were distant rumors of another America we could only gawk at on TV. Here, the post-war aura of a supposed right-minded, middle-class ascendency still drifted through our streets like the scent of dogwoods in early spring. Even during this first period of my childhood, though, that ethos began to change as a result of Kennedy and Johnson's "Great Society" programs. My parents, from their wise-yet-pedestrian grasp of the tenets of our religion, generally saw this moment as a gentile expression of the humane in Judaism—at least as they understood it. And while that narcotic lost its euphoric flush just after the president's assassination, it didn't fade completely until the devastating events of '68—the year this version of our country began to fall apart. During that early period, however, the houses on our block, in all their banal symmetry, still represented the traditional families living within: mediocre, decent, plain, private—and white. Diversity here meant only Jews—still contrary to many other subdevelopments—had been allowed in; there were no Black, Asian, Latino, or Gay families on our street during my early childhood, although by the time we lived there a decade, this had begun to change.

While some of our neighbors during that period cloistered themselves to nurse their prejudices, others emerged from their homes cautiously to greet those new faces. Little by little over the next few years, though, families abandoned Chadwell Lane in what I couldn't grasp then but was, in fact, a new white-flight. Conversely, even as late as the mid '70's, my own *haimasche* family would sit around the dinner table and imagine a future built on a truly capacious social justice—a hope my mother saw as the fulfillment of her unschooled sense of the messianic in Judaism. At other times, and certainly still a part of the era, my friends and I rather saw the future as a set of sexual fantasies that sprung from the *Playboys* and *Penthouses* we'd lifted from our fathers' collections. But most significantly, I now mark that period as the moment I first felt the austerity and sadness of human need: our common longing for acceptance and respect, alongside the prejudices, fears, and self-hatreds that deny or contort those desires. Midcentury suburbia had augured America's prime role in what was then called "A Better Tomorrow"—a layman's city-on-a-hill, arrived at through science, technology, and liberal politics—and we all believed that for a long time. Fifty

years on, I'm still confronting how that calm, blinkered place sustained the sins of the past, and yet also allowed us to live side-by-side with others who were seemingly very different; different, and yet the same—the humanist paradox I believe remains the seat of social compassion, even as we speed forward into a new post-human age. Ironic as it sounds, the disparity between the promise and reality of those postwar years may have been more frustrating to middle-class suburbanites than it was to those above or below our socioeconomic world, simply because our hope—founded as it was on a new *kind* of naivete—was perhaps the most unjaded, and so had the farthest to fall.