

# Medium Town

*On living in a city smaller  
than New York*

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It was an aging street, the one I grew up on, a street more concerned with the grave than with the cradle. There was no hierarchy, no order, no block captain. There was no rich man on the street, no poor man whose unemployment check was running out. Three-bedroom center-hall Colonials with peeling paint faced off across the street, separated by a big, wide terrace where we played touch football on Sunday mornings. There weren't many other boys, and of what boys there were, I don't think I knew what any of their fathers did for a living. I do remember Old Man Farber, who owned the fabric store at the mall and lived with his very butch wife; Mr. Friedman, who lost his law practice, his seat on the school committee, and his Gentile wife when he moved some money from one place to another and got disbarred; Cantor Shames from the local synagogue and his wife Miriam, who gave music lessons and always asked to be paid in cash because "it's easier for the accountant that way"; and Mr. Helfant, who in middle age still lived at home with his mother and handed out pamphlets arguing that water fluoridation was a form of mind control. It was a street with little importance, and with little sense of what importance it had.

That's not a bad way, come to think of it, to sum up Springfield, Massachusetts, an unemployment-blasted town known to most of my adult friends for its bus station, a sad, derelict depot where one changes lines between Boston and New York or hops a Vermont-bound Peter Pan coach for a ski weekend. People can't really believe I'm from there. "I'm from Springfield," I'll say, and they'll answer, "Oh, Longmeadow?" No, not Longmeadow, the suburb where most of the people with money went.

And a word about money: nobody had it. My father was a small-town lawyer who probably made about \$40,000 a year through most of the nineteen-eighties, though I am just guessing. One neighbor taught chemistry at Springfield College, another was a

building manager. Even in Longmeadow, the rich suburb just south of us on the Connecticut border, the bar for being rich was pretty low: a job in upper management at MassMutual, the insurance company, or a successful podiatry practice. Nobody had millions, except the Blake brothers, who founded Friendly's restaurants during the Depression, and Peter Picknelly, who owned Peter Pan bus lines. But that was Longmeadow, and I wasn't from there. I was from Springfield, where running with the educated, middle-class, Caucasian crowd meant that one friend was the son of a Unitarian preacher, another was the son of a marketing manager for a family-owned paper company.

Nobody I knew had a summer home. Nobody drove an expensive car. Luxury for one of my friends meant having a very small boat—but some summers, if money was tight, the boat stayed in the garage, never made the move to a rented slip at a marina on the Connecticut River. For fun, we rode bicycles around Forest Park; in the time before children were made to wear helmets, driving down the steep hill off Washington Boulevard was dangerous and thrilling. We played one-on-one baseball behind Sumner Avenue School, with the pitcher flagging the tennis ball after the batter popped it up. We went candlepin bowling at the X Lanes: we rented shoes and ate hot dogs, and 80 was a good score. (If you don't know candlepin bowling, you're not from Massachusetts.) There was a strong indifference to what could be purchased or sold.

Parents didn't drive us to music lessons or gymnastics; what we demanded from them was to be left alone and not expected back until dinnertime.

This was not 1955—it was 1985. And if this description of my childhood sounds antique or hokey, it's probably because you live either in a town smaller than Springfield, like a suburb of 30,000 people, or in a town much bigger than Springfield, like New York. But my existence remains perfectly intelligible today for anyone who lives in one of those cities in between, like Springfield or Worcester, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut; Des Moines, Iowa; or

Schenectady, New York.

As I get older, I increasingly find that the people I like most are those who understand what it means to be from a deeply unfashionable place. I mean unfashionable in both senses of the word: it was not cool to be from Springfield, and if you were from there you would think nothing of going shopping at the Big Y supermarket with your hair still wet in rollers. I didn't feel this positively about my city when I was young. Like so many of my friends who grew up in small- or medium-sized towns, I expected that I would one day live in New York or someplace nearly as cosmopolitan. The main goal was to be around other smart people, or at least people who shared my intellectual pretensions. After college, I lived for three months in New York, where I worked as a research assistant to a writer; I then moved to Washington, D.C., where I worked as an assistant to Jane Mayer and Joe Klein, staff writers for *The New Yorker*. The two cities are different in some obvious ways: I remember thinking, for example, that I went from being the worst-dressed person in New York to being the best-dressed person in Washington. They were alike in more ways, though: places where young people moved and passed their twenties in a state of passive dislocation, living in houses with changing casts of roommates, paying no attention to local civic life or politics, joining no houses of worship, identifying most strongly with the preferred pub of one's loose circle of friends.

After a year, I left that life to attend graduate school. When I started school in New Haven again, I told myself that I would take the train to New York all the time, but as the months and then years passed, I discovered that I hardly ever left. In my final year of graduate school, I bought a small apartment on Wooster Square, the small plaza in the old Italian district where beginning around four in the afternoon one can smell the pizza cooking at Sally's and Pepe's, the famous restaurants one street over. I probably overpaid for the condominium—the open-house was held the weekend that the cherry blossoms on the square were most spectacularly in bloom, and with the windows of the third-floor flat open wide, the pink petals poked

flirtatiously into the living room.

I don't live on Wooster Square anymore; I now live with my wife and six-month-old daughter in the old Jewish neighborhood of Westville, two blocks from the Yale Bowl, where on Saturdays in the fall loudspeakers blast football information loudly enough to be heard on my front porch. My neighbors include Orthodox Jews and gay men and lesbians, renters and owners, old white people and young black girls in pigtails.

My absolute, total contentment living far from New York, far not just geographically but spiritually, surprises me. I almost never go to parties, and I used to love going to parties. I rarely talk to other writers. I do other things with my time. I'm surprised at how committed I have become to my local synagogue, only a fifteen-minute walk from my house, where I go to Sabbath services nearly every week. Some of the members are fellow academics or writers—the congregation is a favorite of Yale professors—but most of them are not. They are lawyers, engineers, computer technicians, doctors, housewives, old retired ladies who have outlived their husbands, students, and a lot of people whom I see every week but of whose occupations I haven't the foggiest idea.

That's something I can say of many of my neighbors, too: I don't know what they do for a living. Or I sort of know, but not in any meaningful way. I know that Neil works in fund-raising, that Patricia is a librarian or an archivist, that Steve is a social worker. But I don't know where Steve works. I don't know what John and Andrea do at all, even though we chat every time our dogs stop to sniff each other on the street. I presume that most of my neighbors are Democrats, because it's a liberal, somewhat integrated, gay-friendly neighborhood in an almost entirely Democratic town. Beyond that, however, I know them for what neighbors are to each other on West Rock Avenue: people whose children play together, people who actually do borrow cups of sugar for the cake or an onion for the roast. Some couples on the street seem to be close, intimate friends, but that's not the rule, and it's not expected. When an article of mine ran

in *The New York Times Magazine*, about a quarter of the neighbors I bumped into on the street the next week congratulated me, but far more hadn't seen it, and that was fine. To most of them, I am just the young father who works from home a suspicious amount of the time.

Ours is a street radically uninterested in status, in a town that seems even less interested. One friend of mine moved two years ago from Pelham, New York, to New Haven, and not long ago she said to me, "Here, nobody cares what I wear home from the gym." I walk my dog in my pajamas, and nobody cares. The public schools aren't terrific, but almost all the children on my block attend the public elementary school at the end of the street, which means that every morning as I leave with my mutt, J.J., for our morning constitutional I step into an Easter parade of boys and girls, wearing backpacks bigger than they are, walking happily (or trudging gloomily) to a neighborhood school.

When I write about New Haven, I feel a little smug, but mostly I feel tired. So many times in the past ten years I have listened to friends who have stayed in large cities complain about how difficult it is to make ends meet on less than \$100,000 a year, or how having two children would be a tremendous financial strain, even an impossibility. None of what they say is true, of course. If one is willing to live in an unfashionable place, it's all possible. Per square foot, the American housing stock is cheaper, in real dollars, than it was in our grandparents' time—houses only seem more expensive because real estate is so overvalued in big cities and because houses have got so much bigger in the rest of the country. I recently heard an old college classmate, now a financier in New York—a liberal, with "progressive" values—complain about how he had no choice, given his overstretched salary, but to employ an illegal alien as his son's nanny; together, he and his wife probably make about \$400,000 a year. People don't talk that way where I live.

**It's particularly hard when I'm talking with my big-city writer friends to make the case for the medium-sized town. The ones who work as editors have to be in New York, after all—it's where their**

jobs are. It's hard to quarrel with that. But all of them, the editors and writers, have a sense that being in a big city is stimulating to the creative faculties, that somehow the street life of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, or the Castro in San Francisco, energizes their prose and expands their imaginative capacities.

Maybe, but I actually think the evidence runs in the opposite direction. It's true that an extraordinary number of the hip American novels of the last twenty years have been set, at least in part, in New York: *The Corrections*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, *The New York Trilogy*, *Motherless Brooklyn*. And nearly every popular young fiction writer one can name lives in New York: Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Jennifer Vanderbes, Gary Shteyngart, Dara Horn, Benjamin Kunkel, Edwidge Danticat. The New York affluence is so prominent at this moment in time that Meghan Daum garnered an odd amount of publicity for moving to Nebraska—she wrote an essay about it, then a novel. You might have thought she'd bought a two-bedroom co-op on the moon. But we ought to recognize that this is a break with the past. For almost none of the major American novels of the twentieth century were set in New York. There is no New York in Faulkner, Hemingway, or Fitzgerald (except in passing). There is scarcely any New York in the Updike corpus. Saul Bellow's books touch down in New York but are mostly set elsewhere. Philip Roth's heart is across the bridges and through the tunnels, in New Jersey. Of the American masters, one has to go back to Henry James and Edith Wharton to find true New York writers, unless one includes Bernard Malamud, whose New York is a rather mythical, out-of-time place.

Sinclair Lewis may have satirized the Midwest, but he was a Minnesotan and even after living in New York scarcely wrote about it. Faulkner lived mostly in Mississippi, leaving occasionally, as when the lucre of Hollywood beckoned (his years in the West were personally disastrous). Illness may have kept Flannery O'Connor on the Georgia farm, but one imagines that the South would have been her subject no matter where she lived, just as Willa Cather wrote

about the Midwest and Southwest even when living in New York. Eudora Welty stayed in Jackson.

And while time will tell, it seems that the most lasting fiction writers working today live away from New York: David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Marilynne Robinson, Alice Munro (if I may bring in a Canadian), Michael Chabon, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Stone, and of course Roth and Updike. None of them lives in a big city, unless you count Chabon, who lives just miles from San Francisco. Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo would seem to be exceptions, but it is interesting to note that Pynchon is from Long Island originally, and DeLillo was born in the Bronx and attended Fordham University. They are locals, not aspirants.

I don't mean to suggest that there's anything necessarily wrong with living in New York, or that there aren't fine writers, and fine people, who live there. And little of what I am saying about fiction writers applies to non-fiction writers like art or theater critics, who, like their editors, may be tethered to New York by their jobs. But I believe that for many people—not all—there is something neurotic about an attachment to the big city. After all, most of us do not come from the big city; we come from small towns, medium-sized towns, suburbs, exurbs, farms. Those are the places that made us. If we like who we are, like what we've become, then might there not something disordered about turning our backs on our nativity? The flight from our regions and regionalisms is, in this way, not so different from the flight from our ethnicity, or our religion, or our family ties. It bespeaks an inner conflict, which is always a kind of sadness. It's not surprising that as soon as they can afford it some young urbanites hire others to lead their lives vicariously, to walk their dogs and raise their children. Living in a big city is not the cause of alienation from oneself, but it can be a symptom, and another symptom is the willingness to delegate life's richest pastimes to employees.

To me, living in a medium-sized town is, like going to synagogue or settling into domesticity with my wife, baby, and dog, a form of humility. It's what I want to do, but it also sends a message

that I do intend: I don't have wisdom that's any better than the accumulated wisdom of generations before me. Raising children, paying a mortgage, raking leaves, knowing who my alderman is—these were the tasks that were set before my father and grandfather, and even if, by dint of more income or more education, I could be released from them, I don't think that that would make me a better person or open the door to a more satisfying life.

The little bit of wisdom inherent in that sense of humility is also, I believe, crucial to my attempts at art. For it releases me from the quest for status, which is destructive. It gives me an excuse not to attend parties, which drain one's time. And it obviates the need to seek vainly—forever and without satisfaction—that alignment with trends and fashions that may yield some glowing critical notices but which, in the end, dulls the mind and blunts the instrument.