

# LETTER FROM SUBURBIA

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Americans have originated some unique practices in the annals of mankind—doggie bags, pizza delivery, drive-throughs and shopping malls being only some of their more valuable contributions to contemporary civilization. One practice that should be of particular interest to future anthropologists is the annual, supposedly personalized, but in reality mass-produced Christmas letter. Every year, several billion of these compositions burden the postal system, breezily informing hapless and usually disinterested recipients of the originating super-family's multi-faceted adventures and many impressive advances during the preceding year, and how they (the sending family) do wish they (the receiving family) could have shared in some of the excitement. These "letters" include such borderline nauseating phrases as "Brother Jeb has been burning up Wall Street" (presumably with his financial acumen rather than a blowtorch) and "Brad and I decided to get away from it all, and escaped for a few days to this little known island" (later to be rearrested by the authorities, no doubt).

This is not intended to be one of those letters. Rather, it is a heartfelt description of some of the trials of first-time suburbanites. If you detect a somewhat bittersweet edge to what follows, I do apologize. I have attempted to make this missive completely non-toxic, acid-reduced, caffeine-free, less-filling and devoid of any after-taste or greasy residue. The result, I think you will agree, is 99 44/100 % bland, and should be inoffensive to most sensible socio-demographic groups. In fact, four out of five dentists sentenced to a desert island without cable TV recommend this letter as essential reading for their waiting rooms, for those patients who read things. The fifth dentist was having his head examined by one of the thousand doctors similarly moored on a neighboring island. But I digress. Let me start at the beginning.

## ***The House***

We moved not so long ago into a rather large (by our city standards) house in the Washington D.C. suburbs, and have been striving ever since to become responsible and knowledgeable homeowners. When we signed the consent decree a few months earlier with an airy "This ain't so hard!" we budgeted for a certain amount of pleasantly amusing time spent on the homeowner's experience curve, picking up a helpful hint here and a rule of thumb there. What we discovered, instead, was that the privilege of paying a monthly ransom to our friendly mortgage company does not come unfettered with strings. Among other things, it calls for one to quickly become an expert horticulturist, carpenter, electrician, plumber, molly-maid and general all-purpose handyman.

"Ah," my delusional wife said, "At last, your engineering education will come in handy." Her hopes that my pseudo-technical background would prove helpful around the house were quickly dashed. As I have to keep reminding her, they don't actually teach you how to *do* anything in engineering school.

## ***The Gas Grill***

Having bought ourselves a detached structure, the next logical thing for us to do was to acquire

that first necessity of rugged suburban living—an All-American, fully automatic, six-cylinder, 32-valve, propane-powered barbecue grill. We were anxious to start consuming our daily recommended dosage of charred meat, as suggested in the latest report from the Federal Dietetic Theory of the Month Council. Armed with a well-thumbed copy of the ever reliable *Consumer Reports*, we set out to buy ourselves a grill. At this point, we discovered why all of our neighbors seem to own eight-wheel vehicles—the essentials of suburban living simply do not fit in your average mid-sized car. Undaunted, we rented a truck, ferried the beast home, and invited fifteen people to a barbecue that evening.

Three days later, I had reached page 6 of the Assembly Instructions Manual from hell, and had something that could only be described as an impressionist artist's rendering of a cooking device—my unceremonious introduction to the brave new world of “Some Assembly Required” consumer durables. “Some Assembly,” ha! That is like saying that getting to the moon requires some travel. Here's how modern manufacturers appear to view their job: all they need to do is make the parts, pour them into a box, hire some illiterate Taiwanese to write the assembly instructions, and then expect the poor consumer to put the contraption together. Unfortunately, most assemblers like myself are only able to achieve what may be euphemistically described as an impressionistic rendering of the manufacturer's intended product.

At this juncture, I must very strongly urge a Congress preoccupied with frivolous matters of domestic and foreign policy to amend its priorities and enact without delay a “Truth in Assembly Requirements” law before the next grilling season. Packages must be clearly marked with the degree of difficulty involved and the number of hours required by the average college graduate for assembly. Furthermore, form designers from the Internal Revenue Service should not be allowed to moonlight as assembly instruction writers.

Well, enough silliness about grilling. After all, why had we bought a house with not just one, but *two* ovens, and a microwave to boot? Let's get back to the house and take a look around.

### ***The House, Again***

The house is only about seven years old (that's about two in people years), so one could reasonably expect it to be in the pink of good health. It has a sizable plot, and, to former midtown apartment dwellers, is large inside as well—four bedrooms, three bathrooms, den, family room, living room, basement etc. There is a brick patio out back, now featuring that abstract art-deco grill I have just familiarized you with.

The house has a beguilingly benign air about it—it appears to be the kind of house you feel like petting and taking along on long walking tours. If Barbara Walters were a house, she would not be this house. This one's more like a Bill Cosby, or a Bob Newhart or a Mary Tyler Moore—or so we thought.

What we soon discovered was that underneath its shingled and flat-latexed exterior lurks a house that chews tobacco, cusses loudly, scratches itself and spits out of the side of its mouth. Quite possibly, this house makes midnight sacrifices of small animals on full moon nights. In any event, it has proven itself to be a Tough Customer—an Al Capone in concrete and aluminum siding. Like some noxious and delinquent child, the house demands constant attention to keep its spirits up and its systems humming. It wakes to each new day with a groan and a snarl, and must be gently coaxed to brush its teeth and get ready to face the outside world.

Having led a lifelong city-based existence, our knowledge about house-rearing is negligible. The same cannot be said for our new neighbors. I used to consider myself (without any real basis in fact) somewhat handy, but my fumbling efforts pale when compared with my new brethren. While they glibly say it with two-by-fours, I merely stammer with sandpaper. Nonetheless, in the early days, I displayed a certain reckless bravado in matters of maintenance, being willing to go to great lengths to avoid inviting sundry home maintenance professionals into our house. Sometimes, this paid off; most times, a succession of specialists journeyed to our house to remedy the aftermaths of my attempted repairs.

You would think after all those years in assorted Institutes of Technology and Schools of Management and other correctional facilities that I would have acquired an appreciation for the Power of Knowledge. You would be right. It finally dawned upon me: if we wanted our offspring to have the evenly spaced upper canine teeth (not to mention the lower molars) so valued by a fickle society, I would have to bone up in a hurry on the domestic sciences.

This is easier said than done. You see, these handy types, like many insular and self-contained tribes, have developed a strange language entirely their own. It consists substantially of phrases which the unordained find totally unintelligible, intermingled with whistling sounds and exclamations, and topped off with several bottles of beer. As it turns out, the latter should be imbibed only after the offending malady had been corrected. Failing to grasp this subtle point, I reversed the sequence, with predictably unpleasant consequences for all.

In order to maintain our house, the natives informed us, we would have to make periodic visits to a nearby shrine known as "Hechingers", ruled over by the twin advertiser-created deities Harry and Harriet Homeowner. This intrepid holy couple, renowned in these parts via song and advertising flyers, is able to look at a two-by-four (a wooden plank to you and me) in the face and cause it to bend to their considerable whim. They casually plaster and pulverize, sand and surface, hoe and hew, build sun decks and add skylights. They undo and redo, rip out carpeting and reinsulate attics, add dry wall and remove wet bars. They drill with their left hands while painting with their right hands. In other words, they are all capable, all conquering and utterly without fear.

Meanwhile, we had a toilet that would not stop gurgling. Weaklings that we were, and having just been through a chastising experience with the garbage disposal (now known in our house as the Black Hole in the Sink), we searched for a plumber to stop by and provide a consultation. After much research, we found one that makes house calls. A short two weeks later, this young mogul arrived. A quick look, followed by a rapid excursion to Hechingers for a \$1.25 thingummy, five minutes for installation, and the Y.M. graciously relieved us of the one hundred and twenty dollars we had set aside towards braces for the young ones. We mumbled our thanks and promised to forever keep his magnetic card affixed to our refrigerator door.

## ***The Garden***

So you can see that we are facing quite a challenge out here in the deceptively serene suburbs. Perhaps you are saying to yourself, "Well, that doesn't sound so bad." But wait, there's more. Let us step for a moment outside the house and see what is happening without. It certainly *looks* peaceful, but I'm sure you realize by now, appearances are deceptive around here. Behind the decorative shrubbery and the manicured lawns you see all around lurk some immensely competitive and frankly exhibitionist souls. These denizens, frustrated perhaps in their early

attempts at uncovering their creative genius, and having been informed by various guidance counselors along the way that they were entirely lacking in artistic sensibility, have decided to express themselves via Organized Vegetation. They are the aspiring Mozarts of Mulch, the Wordsworths of Weedkillers, the Longfellows of Lawn-Sprinklers—quick, stop me before I alliterate again. I think you get the idea.

This very public form of artistic braggadocio does make for a pleasing view for occasional visitors to the neighborhood. However, pity the poor soul residing next door—yours truly—who wander outside on a Saturday morning to do a little pottering in the yard, and discovers an increasingly glaring disparity developing. Take, for instance, the “lawn-line” - that usually invisible border where your property ends and the neighbor’s begins. In our case, it has become more like the McMillan Line or something. It dramatizes the class struggle brewing between our lawns—my neighbor’s a rich, soft, lustrously green carpet, mine a modest, scraggly, somewhat-greenish-but-more-like-yellowish growth. His hedges have just received their weekly manicure, and nary a twig or a leaf is visible that is not a part of an overall theme.

I, on the other hand, have taken a more Libertarian approach to my shrubbery, allowing it the freedom to express itself as it feels appropriate, as long as it does not acquire any alarmingly suggestive shapes. The best I can do is sigh and console myself that I owe philosophical allegiance to a more unfettered, Existentialist school of gardening. Meanwhile, my cheery neighbor is treating his lawn to a fifth coating of ammonia-dxp or some such whatever. Unnerved, I withdraw indoors, only to have the toilet gurgle at me in a meaningful manner.

Normally, such a situation would inspire me to get the hoe and start hewing (if that is what one does with hoes). However, in this instance, I have to confess that I had been shaken into immobility. Already, in my paralyzed idleness, I had missed the Great Fall Fertilizing, the Implanting of the Tulip and Other Bulbs, the Feeding of the Rhododendrons, and God knows what other tribal rituals. The situation appears hopeless indeed. If this keeps up, I shall be excommunicated by the early spring, and will be reduced to tending indoor ferns only.

## **The Super-Duper Market**

There are other fixtures of suburbia that city dwellers may find of passing anthropological interest. One of the verities of life in these parts is that everything gets built on a massive scale. Developers operate on the guiding principle that the Larger the Better, and that Garangutan is Great. Thus we have the phenomena of department-store sized video stores and football-field sized supermarkets (don’t even ask me how large the football fields are). Taken together, these two entities represent a substantial chunk of the suburbanite’s non-homeowner-related existence. Come with me as we take a closer look.

The first thing you will notice at the suburban supermarket is the size of the shopping cart. If it were any larger, it would have to be classified as a sub-compact vehicle and be subjected to licensing and EPA regulations. Maneuvering this four-wheeler (with all-wheel randomized steering) through the aisles while trying to avoid running over women in lime green stretch pants or knocking down the freestanding knockwurst display (Sizzlin’ Super Sausage Special!!!) is no mean feat. Doing so while browsing the twelve-page, four color glossy sale brochure is even harder. This publication, renewed every single week, boasts production values that would do a minor newsmagazine proud. Its depictions of bountiful fruits and vegetables and handsome cuts of meat are indeed pleasant sights. Of course, food items in America are required by law *not* to

look like their advertisements, so we are not unduly disappointed when we see the real thing.

We proceed down the aisle in a manner befitting a stately galleon. It strikes us that this supermarket may be suffering through some sort of identity crisis. It apparently cannot make up its mind whether it wants to be a grocery store, a flower shop, a fancy restaurant, a bakery or a drug store. In pondering this question, the bigwigs appear to have thrown up their hands and exclaimed “To heck with it—let’s be all of the above.”

There is, naturally, a superabundance of choice in nearly every decision we are called upon to make. This is not good, especially for people who agonize over jam versus jelly for the breakfast toast. We must choose between twelve types of low calorie whole grain wheat bread, ten varieties of melons, about six hundred different (yet strangely similar) breakfast cereals, and at least six forms of milk—skim, ½ percent, 1 percent, 2 percent, whole, lactose-free etc. Ditto for nearly every other product category. After a while, tiring of pre-purchase dithering and post-purchase self-doubt, we regress to basic randomness, selecting whichever package comes to hand first. This proves to be a surprisingly effective decision model.

By the end of the trip, we are emotionally drained. The last time I had to confront so many multiple choices, I was taking the GMAT. At journey’s end, we arrive at the checkout area, once again offering us a profusion of alternatives. After choosing the “48-64 Items, Checks Only, Plastic Bags, No Candy” checkout lane, we settle in for what promises to be a long wait, and decide to catch up on our serious reading.

Choosing what to read is a delicate matter. On the one hand, a weighty journal promises to advise us on twelve ways to use our zodiac signs in order to lose weight off our flabby thighs in seven days (thus emulating a well-known TV personality). On the other hand, another promised the revelation of an ungodly liaison between an Elvis Presley love child and a communist entity from outer space. Each explored the ramifications of all of this on Roseanne Barr’s personal life.

Having exhausted our choice muscles back in Aisle 24, we settle instead for the live sport of People Watching. In this instance, we decide to casually scrutinize other people’s grocery choices and quietly cringe at their selections. Between something labeled beef tripe and some unidentified vital organs of a pig, we have plenty to wince at.

Soon enough, we discover that customer processing has proceeded apace, and it is our turn to report to headquarters. Our selections are rapidly “scanned” by an expressionless late model GCM (gum chewing moll). This process, rather surprisingly, passes without mishap, and we wheel our loot out to the car.

## ***The Video Store***

This being the beginning of a Long Weekend (perhaps the greatest of all American innovations), we decide it might be a good idea to check in at the video store and pick up a movie. A simple matter, you would expect, and one that, in the recent past, used to be a leisurely and civilized exercise. No longer so.

One of the problems with this video business is that it must Cater To All Tastes. In this instance, the store is swarming with teenagers, which I find mildly inexplicable; I thought teenagers were required to be out on the road and in the malls on weekends, doing teenager-like things, rather than sitting in front of TVs watching movies. At any rate, there is restlessness among the inmates. It appears that all 56 copies of Rambo IV and all 38 copies of Rocky VIII have already

been checked out, so the youngsters decide to hang around waiting for some copies to be placed on the “fresh returns” table. Soon, a mild scuffle breaks out when a still-warm copy of the sensitive love story, “Revenge of the Super Mario Mutant Ninja Nerd Turtles Police Academy from Hell III” is placed upon the table. Eight (male) teenagers with (unmatching) earrings argue loudly about presumptive property rights and finally settle out of court.

All around us, slightly wild-eyed parental units clutch an average of five movies each close to their chests, while waiting for a few more to round out their culturally-enriching weekend. They noisily give each other capsule reviews and advice, dubious at best, on which movies are worth renting (anything with a roman numeral suffix or whose title is a five-letter word beginning with “R”). We sigh (come to think of it, we seem to spend a lot of time sighing these days), and quietly withdraw from the fray, unbloodied but video-less. No entertainment for us tonight. Besides, the humidifier has been making a funny sound...

### **Have a Nice Day**

There are other chapters in the Suburban Experience—the Monster Mall, A Day at the Parking Lot, the Multiplex Movie Mystery, Suburban Ethnic Food, to name a few—but their recounting shall have to wait until my next letter. Maybe we will run into you at a garage sale or a bake-off or something. Unlikely, though, since we probably won’t need any garages for a while.