

We swung around and drove back home, seeing for ourselves how handsomely Fernwood emerged out of the anonymous miles of suburban wasteland that lay between it and the city. First you passed by a jumble of motels, gas stations, bowling alleys, discount stores, drive-in restaurants, overpasses, underpasses, viaducts, garished by giant signs of plump-cheeked boys holding hotdogs aloft, and one sign that caught my attention: a very American-looking man holding aloft a can of beer, with a puzzled expression, the caption being, *Read a beer can tonight*. Do you think I could have made up something so marvelous myself? Never, never! America outdoes all its writers, even its amateur writers!

Then you made your way through the first suburb, proletarian and proudly white Oak Woods, a dinky, arrogant neighborhood with a preponderance of American flags waving in the wind, and many used-car lots along the “Miracle Motor Mile.” Then came the slightly better suburb of Pleasure Dells, as bereft of dells as Oak Woods was bereft of oaks, but decked out perhaps with pleasure and equipped with three vast, sprawling magnamarkets that sold not just food, apparently, but lawn chairs, cheap clothing, and all the drugs you might want to kill a vacant hour or so; an oceanic tide of automobiles was parked around these buildings.

We sped up a bit for the next suburb, where the highway’s shoulders fell back and buildings were built farther from the road. This was Bornwell Pass, inferior to Fernwood but acceptable for certain kinds of shopping. One shopping plaza here with its parking lot must have covered several acres. The stores were not “shoppes” like those in Fernwood but just plain stores. “Isn’t that vulgar?” my mother said.

Then we nearly broke through to the country, but it was an illusion—just a housing subdivision called Country Club Manor. As my mother raced by I glanced through the gate (not a real gate but just two pillars of red brick to match the red-brick colonials inside), and she said, “That awful Vemeer built this slum.” Her attitude cheered me.

On the other side of the highway, which had branched out now to a magnanimous eight lanes with snow-encrusted grass in the center, were more subdivisions, one after another: Fox Ridge, Lakeside Groves, Chevy Chase Heights, Bunker Hill Towne, Waterloo Acres, Arcadia Pass... Real-estate salesmen with no taste had driven us under the red-brick archways of some of these settlements, and Father had had to explain apologetically, “I’m afraid that... this sort of thing just won’t *do*.” Our English teacher at my school, catering to the prejudices of his well-bred young pupils, kept referring to the “Fox Ridge mentality,” which we were to understand was a conformity of deadly intensity, a mediocrity which stopped precisely at the clean white-and-black sign that proclaimed: FERNWOOD VILLAGE LIMITS SPEED LIMIT 45.

We sped past at sixty, and my mother said, more or less to me, “This is a lovely place to live.” Slowing reluctantly for a traffic light, she said again, “It’s lovely here,” and after a few minutes muttered sideways to me, “Are you happy in Fernwood, Richard?”

“Some of my classmates aren’t happy,” I said, deliberately choosing the word “classmates” because it sounded so natural. “That boy whose mother drinks—”

“But are you happy?”

“Some of the kids who worry about their parents, you know, their parents fighting and maybe getting a divorce... well, they’re pretty miserable, but not me.”

“That’s good,” she said vaguely.

Joyce Carol Oates, *Expensive People*, 1968