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Island Party

by J Bryan McGeever

It's my daughter's first school dance, an informal gathering of parents and students at an elementary school playground in East Setauket, Long Island. Tonight's event has an 80s nostalgia theme. Songs from various John Hughes films blare from the DJ's speakers, transporting this bustling suburb back to a simpler time of big hair, MTV, and voodoo economics. Along the edge of the ad hoc dance floor stands a solitary fun-dad in an Adidas tracksuit and Kangol bucket hat. The party is just beginning.

As more people arrive, a pleasant carnival-like atmosphere takes over, kids zigzagging between the playground and the dance floor. Frankie Goes To Hollywood tells everyone to *Relax* as security guards in yellow windbreakers sift through the crowd. Some are retired NYPD. I discreetly eye their waists and the linings of their jackets. I don't think they're armed, and it troubles me that I wish they were.

Most parents chat amiably while their children roam the grounds. I trail mine from a comfortable distance like a devoted member of her Secret Service detail. The prospect of her vanishing into a crowd gives me short panic attacks. Her crew wants to know why she keeps pointing to different sections of the schoolyard, and I overhear her saying, "My dad needs to know where I am." One of her cohorts looks at me, raising two fingers in the shape of an *L* before scampering off. Fair enough, Junior, but some situations call for excess.

Once Aubrey was born, my partner Tiffany and I decided to buy a house. Our apartment in Brooklyn was lovely, but owning a home in Ditmas Park's Victorian Flatbush was pure fantasy.

After several years of searching, we decided to move to Suffolk County at the tail end of 2020. I'd grown up in the Setauket/Port Jefferson area and knew every deli and

pizza place within a ten-mile radius. I climbed every tree and swam in every pool. This homecoming was going to be rather cozy.

Tiffany is a native of Coney Island. Setauket was nothing to her but an unusual sound that needed to be Googled. Aubrey is biracial and considers herself “Black like mommy.” Before moving, Tiffany researched the town’s demographics to see how many people in Setauket would look like them.

“1.27%? Are you freaking kidding?”

“One-of-the-oldest-Black-churches-in-America-is-in-Setauket,” I quickly argued.

“With a choir that sings to no one. Forget it.”

“Look, she’ll have a fantastic childhood. Your information is from the 2000 census. I’m sure things have changed.”

They hadn’t. Long Island has quietly been this way for as long as I can remember. One would think an area nearly 120 miles long, packed with over eight million people, would be under more scrutiny, but living in the shadow of the largest metropolis in the US has provided deep cover for generations. Its demographics change as quickly as the zip codes. Make a left at the Expressway or a right at the train tracks, and not only will the size of the homes change but so does the American experience. Name a town, I’ll tell you who lives there. Segregation is as natural to Long Island as learning to swim in the Sound.

My first experience with race relations on Long Island occurred at a drive-in just ten minutes away from my daughter’s school. On June 11, 1982, Heavyweight champ, Larry Holmes, had agreed to take on challenger, Gerry Cooney, for the richest purse in boxing history. Infamous fight promoter, Don King, immediately said the hushed part about the fight out loud. Cooney was a Great White Hope. There’d not been a White champion in over two decades and the prospect that it might occur that night was thrilling. At the time it was the biggest closed-circuit pay-per-view production ever.

My father and I stood in the gravel staring up at a movie screen along with several hundred other Long Islanders. Make no mistake, we’d come to scream our heads off for the big Irish brawler, the gigantic Catholic kid who’d grown up just thirty minutes away in Huntington.

The atmosphere was electric. Whenever any part of Cooney's glove touched any part of Holmes' body a roar tore through the crowd, and our accents grew thicker.

"Yeah, dat's what I'm tawkin' 'bout!"

"Lez go, Cooney, ya big, goofy bastid!"

Ours was the sound of desperate hope. Within several rounds, the better fighter took over. The crowd grew quiet and gloomy. Behind us, a small group of Black men jabbed the air, cheering and celebrating the way we'd done moments earlier. Why were they so happy? Long Island was losing. I nudged my dad and nodded to them.

"They want Holmes to win," he said casually. "That's just how it is."

Why bother rooting for the 'home team' when it's never felt like home? It would be decades before I understood this.

Slightly north of my daughter's school lies the Incorporated Village of Old Field South, an upscale enclave of Setauket. A visit to the community's history page claims the neighborhood was founded in 1929 by the Suffolk County Development Corporation, owned and operated by wealthy philanthropist Ward Melville. Once its design was complete, strict rules were established for its inhabitants. "To this day," the page explains, "our community is governed by covenants that run with the land and preserve a sense of architectural and natural dignity."

A resident of Old Field South recently emailed me a copy of these covenants, presented to him upon purchasing his home in 1976: "No part of said premises herein conveyed shall be used or occupied in whole or in part by any person of African or Asiatic descent or by any person not of the White or Caucasian race except that of domestic servants…."

The current website doesn't mention the document's original contents, or why they were issued as late as 1976. The updated edition is available for perusal but makes no mention of race. Its abracadabra-like absence without explanation is eerie. Clicking between the scrubbed version and its original leaves the reader feeling dazed, the icy proclamation of the first, the slick, polished veneer of the second.

Old Field South is just five minutes from our home. Aubrey attends The Three Village School District and is completing the fourth grade. One day she'll attend a high school called Ward Melville.

So, is a beautiful place still beautiful when it fails to reckon with its past?

These past three years I'd given Tiffany my word that statistics were unimportant. The lack of diversity in Setauket was worth it, I maintained, because this Ward Melville High School had absolutely everything—acres of gleaming turf for championship teams to win in perpetuity, formidable drama, and music programs, a marching band that played the theme song from *Frozen*, and a nationally recognized science department. To put it in 80s nostalgia terms, Ward Melville was the James Spader of public schools, an army of world-beaters in slicked-back hair and popped collars, something sleek, imposing, and glittery, so why not my kid and others like her?

I'd known racial covenants had been used during the development of Nassau County's Levittown—America's first suburb!—but the realization that it had been done here as well was personal. The irony of tracking my daughter's every move on the playground when I was the one who may have put her in jeopardy, turning her and Tiffany into unwitting social pioneers, was troubling.

Yet despite these concerns we're still here, and our decision to stay runs through a gauntlet each morning getting to work, 118 miles roundtrip. We're NYC school teachers. Tiffany's building is in Brooklyn. Mine's in South Jamaica. She sleeps soundly in the passenger seat, while I see taillights in my dreams at night. During the afternoon commute, we like to chat about our day.

"Watch it, slow down!"

"I'm just keeping up with the pack. It's Thunderdome out there."

"This song is so old."

"Please. Simon's a poet and Garfunkel sings like an angel."

The next morning, four a.m. arrives and we're back at it.

"The Springsteen channel again? How many times can a *screen door slam*?"

Whenever I receive unexpected calls from the school nurse over bellyaches, I leave work early to pick up Aubrey. "The nurse said you should have been here a half hour ago," she tells me.

The nurse has never driven the *Van Wyck* at noon.

We wouldn't do this unless our girl was thriving. Just prior to moving, Aubrey's education was nothing but dubious Zoom meetings, performing singalongs and jumping-jacks by herself in our living room, while her new school in Setauket was offering safe, in-person instruction with plexiglass guards on each desk. Had we remained in Brooklyn throughout the pandemic, there's no telling how much of her development would have been hindered.

She's also affectionate and loves to swing her arms between us as we move through a crowd. Invariably, there's a shifting of eyes from onlookers, a quick scan of her parents followed by a dip to her, then back up again, which is fine. Curiosity is natural and we get it. A pretty, Black woman conceived a beautiful child with a guy who looks like a middle-aged version of the blond villain from an 80s teen flick. It's not something one sees every day so take us in and have a blast. The Setauket reviews are in and they're overwhelmingly positive:

Oh, you've made my day!

Wow, you've given me hope!

Look, I've got one, too! (White woman presenting her biracial kid for viewing)

Awkward, strange, and downright goofy always trumps hate. It was Brooklyn, after all, where a classmate told Aubrey she was too light to be Black, not Setauket. Notions of who gets to live where on a shared planet have endured forever, but we're simply too busy to fret over it now.

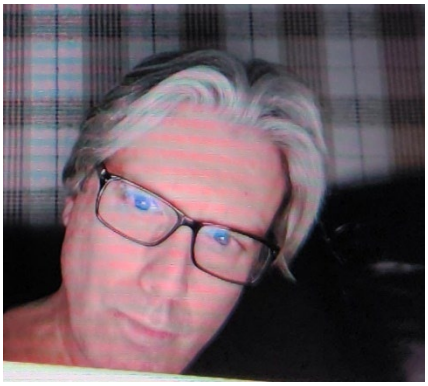
It's a familiar story in America. A wealthy man did some good with his money, donating property for schools, a state university, and a major hospital. He built villages and beautiful parks. He also got things wrong, but if we refuse to tread where bias has occurred, there will be no places left to stand.

No one's calling for the man's name to be removed from buildings and historical landmarks, leaving blank spaces and hard feelings all over town. There's no total solution to our parental concerns regarding Melville's original covenants, but there is this—one day Aubrey will attend the school named after him, on the land he bestowed to the

community, and there's nothing his ghost can do about it. My family lives in East Setauket, on the North Shore of Long Island, and we trust that our child will live her best life here.

Back on the playground, my daughter's friends see me panning the crowd like a searchlight and cry out to me. "Hey, Aubrey's Dad! She's over here!"

My girl is on the swing, pumping hard and soaring high, until the chains start to buckle, and her old man tells her to quit showing off.



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