

Apocalypse in Suburbia

Mikita Brottman

I. "You live in a dream," says Uncle Charlie to his small town niece in Hitchcock's movie *Shadow of a Doubt*. "Do you know the world is a foul sty? Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses you'd find swine? The world's a hell. What does it matter what happens in it?"

On a quiet Sunday morning in August 1986, just before midday, two planes crashed in the sky above the city of Cerritos, near Los Angeles. The pilot of a small single-engine Piper Alpha plane flew too high, into a restricted layer of air space, and sheared off the tail of a DC-9 passenger jet. This jet fell upside down straight out of the sky and landed right on the peaceful Cerritos suburb of Carmenita, flattening four homes and engulfing eight more in flames that reached as high as a hundred feet.

Many of these suburban homes had their fronts ripped right off, and their insides immediately became a hell. Interior walls were splattered with blood and gore. People were crushed while eating breakfast; late sleepers burned alive in their beds. As psychologists Melvin Hokanson and Bonnita Wirth describe it, the peaceful suburban streets of Ashworth Court, Reva Court, and Holmes Avenue were strewn with thousands of body parts. Human torsos landed on rooftops, slammed against trees, and smashed through the windshields of parked cars. The whole area was suddenly engulfed in the smell of kerosene and burning flesh.

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Eleven houses on four separate streets were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged, and seven others received minor damage. Eighty-six people were killed by the crash, including many simply going about their morning business in their homes on the ground.

In Carmenita, the suburbs finally got their own apocalypse.

It had been a long time coming.

II. I first visited the U.S. from England as a young teenager in the late 1970s, when my family joined a vacation club that arranged for families from different countries to trade homes for the summer. We ended up exchanging our house with that of a family who lived in the suburb of Bethesda, Maryland, not far from Washington, D.C. The house seemed so enormous and the neighborhood so impressive that I couldn't help feeling that the American family who had to spend the summer in our old semi-detached Victorian row house in dark, rainy Sheffield was getting rather a raw deal.

Compared to Sheffield, Bethesda seemed like Shangri-La. I remember being amazed by the wide, quiet roads, the immaculate lawns with their water-sprinklers jetting like fountains in the sunlight, the enormous size of the houses, the neighbors' friendly charm. I loved the mailboxes at the end of every driveway, the electricity pylons, the quiet, tree-lined streets, and the fact that everybody seemed to know each other's name and neighbors waved to one another as they drove by. I could hardly have imagined a more opulent, more sumptuous, more utopian environment.

A cold, damp city in northern England, Sheffield is still characterized by street after street of indistinguishable redbrick row houses, built right up to the edge of the sidewalk, some still with outside toilets in a communal concrete yard behind. So it was difficult for me to understand what Americans meant when they complained about houses in the suburbs being "all alike." The row houses in Sheffield were "all alike." As far as I could tell, the houses in Bethesda were all individual, all separate, all different, all special, and all unique.

It was also hard for me to understand American people's complaints about the "newness" of the suburbs. For me, newness equaled luxury. Who would want to live in an "old" house like ours—a house without central heating, without a shower, with two steep staircases, and damp in the walls? To me, the houses I visited in the American suburbs were almost space-age with their single-story sprawl, their huge rooms, their garages, their air conditioning, and their open-plan kitchens full of gadgets I'd never seen before—dishwashers, waste disposal units, waffle-makers, and microwaves.

Later, I came to realize that the things I loved about the suburbs were the things most Americans hate about them—their sterility, their uniformity, and their calm. I loved the fact that nothing was within walking distance, and you had to go everywhere by car (it was always a thrill for me to ride in those huge, excessive cars with their automatic gears). I loved the enormous shopping malls with their multiplex cinemas and gargantuan parking lots. I loved everything that was different from damp, dirty, overcrowded Sheffield.

Now, in retrospect, I've realized that I was probably seeing the suburbs as they

were first seen by urban Americans in the atmosphere of 1950s postwar triumphalism, when they were first conceived and built. Suburbs like Bethesda were originally planned as areas for ideal living, with their wide roads and modern single-family dwellings. They were designed as utopian locales where city met country, where nature and culture were brought together without pollution, traffic jams, or crowds of immigrants. The fact that almost all development activity in the U.S. for the last half-century has been directed toward creating suburbs out of rural areas should indicate that there's something about places like Bethesda that people have always craved, and perhaps still do.

Significantly, it seemed to me that the U.S. suburbs I visited as a child were all inhabited by polite, affluent, white middle-class families. Our neighbors in Bethesda were all exceptionally kind and generous. They introduced my brothers and I to their own kids, took us to the pool, let us play in their yards and invited us to their barbecues—all the things that good suburban neighbors are supposed to do. I never gave it a second thought at the time, but in retrospect it seems surprising how ready our parents were to turn their children over to the hands of these complete strangers. In Sheffield, we barely knew our neighbors' names, and the only time they called round was to complain about something one of us had done. But I remember feeling at the time that these beautiful suburbs somehow seemed to induce neighborliness. In Bethesda I never dropped litter, or stuck chewing gum on parked cars, or peeped in people's windows—the kinds of things I would normally do in Sheffield.

A few years later, I became obsessed with American horror movies from the 1950s, and it was then that I first realized how important this neighborly behavior must have been, because it seemed that these virtuous suburbanites were consistently exempt from the horrors of divine retribution. In the kinds of cataclysmic disaster movies I liked to watch—movies that were often shown late at night on the BBC—catastrophes seemed to happen only to the inhabitants of the world's biggest cities. In *Them!*, which I still remember vividly after first watching it as a young teenager, a swarm of massive, migrating ants invaded the sewers of Los Angeles after being exposed to radiation at an atomic test site. In *Beginning of the End*, radioactive fertilizer resulted in the creation of monstrous grasshoppers that converged upon downtown Chicago. In *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, San Francisco was attacked by a radioactive octopus that destroyed the Golden Gate Bridge and Market Street Tower before being torpedoed to bits. Radioactive reptiles never seemed to be a problem in the suburbs.

New York was perhaps the archetypal apocalyptic site in these movies. *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, for example, featured a prehistoric creature that swam to New York City and attacked Manhattan, stamping on people in Times Square and Wall Street, and taking a bite out of the Roller Coaster at Coney Island. Big foreign cities were not immune to such attacks. The first Godzilla film, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, showed the eponymous radioactive dinosaur trampling over Tokyo, and *The Giant Behemoth* starred a brontosaurus with radioactive breath attacking London and destroying the Houses of Parliament.¹ I looked in vain for a film that showed an atomically mutated dinosaur stamping on Sheffield.

It seemed to be no coincidence that in 1950s American cinema these secular versions of apocalypse were always visited on the city and never the suburbs. Of course, the original apocalyptic vision, revealed to St. John in the Book of Revelation, itself describes a devastation wreaked exclusively upon sinful cities like Sodom, Gomorrah, and especially Babylon, “that great city” who “made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.”

These “apocatropolis” movies seemed to reflect something important about the way most Americans felt about the “big city” in the 1950s—that is, as the primary location of serious violence, a place distinctly deserving of Armageddon. As any fan of Mafia movies could tell you, the 1950s saw the rise of organized crime in most major American cities, especially Chicago, New York, and Las Vegas. The 1950s was also the decade in which the concepts of “mass” and “random” murders first came to public attention, although this was long before the rise of the serial killer. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the popular stereotype of the random murderer was the dark night prowler who broke into single girls’ apartments in the city for an orgy of murder and rape.

Certain murder cases seemed to become particularly iconic in the way they suited popular preconceptions of the dangers of city living. Between June 14, 1962, and January 4, 1964, for example, thirteen single women in Boston fell victim to a tall, dark stranger who conned his way into their apartments and left them murdered—sexually molested and strangled with articles of their own clothing. Two years later, during the night of July 14, 1966, a night prowler broke into a nurses’ boarding house on the south side of Chicago and raped and murdered eight student nurses. In the same year, the anonymous night-stalking gunman known only as the Zodiac Killer embarked on a series of random murders in San Francisco and other cities in the Bay Area. Especially iconic for what it seemed to suggest about the dangers of city life was the Kitty Genovese Case in 1964, in which a New York City woman was raped and murdered despite waking 38 people with her screams, not one of whom either came to her aid or called the police for help.

Part of what I felt in Bethesda—and what was obviously so appealing about the American suburbs in the 1950s and ‘60s—was their sense of safety, of an ideal community of white, middle-class families. If you knew everybody who lived on your street, like the neighbors in Bethesda seemed to do, the chances of being attacked in the middle of the night by a dark, murderous prowler seemed pretty negligible, especially since most suburban homes boasted state-of-the-art automatic porch lights and security alarms. And if anything *did* go wrong, why, you could always run next door and ask Mr. and Mrs. Weiss to call the police.

Today, of course, the idea that the suburbs are “sinister” is so taken for granted, so ingrained in the American consciousness, that it often seems surprising to consider they could ever have been seen in any other way. But it was not until the 1970s and ‘80s that plot after plot of perfectly manicured lawns started to seem . . . well . . . kind of creepy.

III. Significantly, the 1950s was famously a period of social consensus and conformity in America, and yet it was also, not coincidentally, a time which saw the

emergence of many subversive cultural productions, including beat writing and rock and roll music. The appearance of so many radical cultural forms during an era notorious for its social conservatism indicates that there were perceptible public doubts over whether this kind of mass consensus was really healthy. News stories about big city violence in the 1950s found an eager audience in suburban readers, who may have been reminded that, unlike the mind, the human body cannot be kept under control and made to conform; our bodies betray us at every step. Violence is a very clear example of the body dominating reason, a vivid index of the loss of physical control. The eagerness with which suburban audiences read news stories about the Zodiac Killer and the Boston Strangler suggests the need for a challenge to bodily conformity. In a way, these big city killers were acting out, upon the bodies of others, national anxieties about whether or not the social and cultural consensus of the 1950s was really in our best interests, as well as a profound public anxiety about being able to “pull it off.”

The 1960s saw the beginning of what has sometimes been referred to as the “secularization” of Freudian psychoanalysis in popular American culture. In 1968, psychologist and scholar Philip Rieff observed that “psychological man” was rapidly overtaking “Christian man” as the dominant character type in American society. According to Rieff, the aim of “Christian man” was to discard the notion of selfhood, to repent all sins, and to cultivate virtue, self-discipline, and humanity. But for “psychological man,” life is centered not on the soul but the self. According to Rieff, “Christian man” was born to be saved; “psychological man” was born to be pleased. “Psychological man” rejected both the idea of sin and the need for salvation, since he aspired to nothing higher than “feeling good about himself.” “The difference,” writes Rieff, “was established long ago, when ‘I believe!’ the cry of the ascetic, lost precedence to ‘one feels,’ the caveat of the therapeutic” (103).

It must be strongly emphasized, however, that this apparent embracing of the therapeutic during the 1960s and ‘70s came not from an intelligent popular understanding of Freud, but more as a result of the media dissemination of a simplified, diluted version of Freudian psychoanalysis. This process transmuted many of Freud’s ideas into a kind of “Freud Lite,” in which the basic tenets of psychoanalysis were interpreted in such a way as to dilute and displace the truly disturbing implications of many of Freud’s ideas. Less palatable elements of Freudian theory were conveniently discarded, such as his notion of the connection between humor and neurosis, outlined in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. His theory of the “Death Drive,” articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, was often rejected outright, and in many cases of theoretical divergence Freud was cast as a straw man in arguments that established polarities not really present in his theory. On the other hand, the more accessible of Freud’s notions were readily embraced, albeit in a form that Freud himself would probably never have recognized. The most influential of these was without a doubt the concept that problems and anxieties—especially sexual ones—are “repressed” in the unconscious and disguised beneath a superficial veneer of apparent “normality.” This simplified dilution of a complex notion has now become an ideological commonplace in contemporary American thought.

The idea of unconscious repression is particularly appealing because it implies that we are essentially driven by phantom forces unknown to us—drives and compulsions inherited from unenlightened parents or inculcated by inadequate or abusive families. The thought that we may be victims of our pasts is an idea that has proved remarkably tenacious in the popular mind because it displaces personal responsibility; our failings and weaknesses are no longer our fault, but the unconscious issue of childhood wounds and family entanglements. This renunciation of personal agency was then appropriated in the 1980s by already popular self-help groups and Twelve-Step programs, with their injunctions to admit “powerlessness” in the face of temptation. It also led to the popular notion that memories—especially memories of sexual abuse—can be repressed until reawakened by a traumatic incident or an inspired therapist.

One important consequence of the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis is the assumption, consistently reiterated in the contemporary media, that perhaps the most reliable index of repression is “normality,” and the more “normal” you are, the more you have to hide. The self-aware, psychologically “healthy” individual is typically emotional, confused, messy, open, and demonstrative. Those who remain distant, reserved, and inhibited are often suspected of having “issues” at best—or, at worst, of concealing some dark and terrible secret.

And the architectural equivalent of this orderly, detached, unemotional condition is, of course, suburbia.

IV. After living in the U.S. for almost five years now, I’ve come to realize that Bethesda is neither especially spectacular nor particularly well-to-do, and that the handsome neighborhoods of 1950s suburbia have in the last thirty years mutated into something less triumphant. No longer the safe retreat of prosperous middle-class families, suburban homes have gradually become convenient and economical for blue collar workers as well as immigrants, leading to the same kinds of social tensions and pressures that often lead to violent crime in the cities. Difficult as it may be to believe, by the 1980s people who left the dangerous cities for the safety of the suburbs were actually increasing their risk of becoming victims of violent crime, mainly because the relative isolation of suburban homes made them easy targets for intruders.

Movies like *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* “tore the front off houses” in the 1940s and ‘50s, but these were set in small towns rather than suburbia. It was not until the 1970s that the suburbs began to appear as the setting for menacing goings-on, in films like *The Stepford Wives* and *Dawn of the Dead*, where it was specifically their uniformity—and that of their unthinking, automated inhabitants—that made them so uniquely terrifying. The suburbs continued to be used as a backdrop for horror stories all through the 1980s, perhaps most effectively in the work of director Steven Spielberg and author Stephen King, and in movies like *Poltergeist*, *Cujo*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Parents*. Suburbia continues to be the archetypal setting for movies about sinister or dysfunctional families, as seen in recent movies like *Arlington Road* and *American Beauty*.

Since their original conception as a utopian retreat for middle-class families, the American suburbs have come to be seen as increasingly ominous and are now an important annex of that terrifying place known as “out there.” This is society’s boiler room, the home of rapists, shoe-bombers, pedophiles, family annihilators, snuff movie-makers, internet porn-fiends, and other fashionable demons. Belief in such a place is itself supported by the assumption that it is the evil people “out there” who are responsible for the horrors that occur on a daily basis in American society. This otherworld is also located “underground,” as in “underground movies,” and can now be accessed equally readily through cyberspace, where virtual stalkers and scoundrels hitch-hike up and down the information superhighway, presumably offering footage of animal torture and pre-pubescent children involved in sexually explicit acts.

Back in the mid-1980s, however, the most fashionable of these demons was the serial killer, whose profile—at least according to the media—was significantly different from the dime-a-dozen slayers and stranglers that stalked the city streets. The “model” serial killer was a white male in his mid-to-late thirties, often attractive, and of average or above average intelligence. Unlike garden-variety slashers and stalkers, he was smart, clean-shaven, articulate, and intelligent, with a steady job, a nice house in the suburbs, and an attractive, baffled family who “never suspected a thing.”

One of the most important cases in the reconfiguration of the suburbs in the American mindset is that of John Wayne Gacy, a serial killer who was arrested in 1978 and convicted of systematically murdering 33 young men and boys from the early to late 1970s. Reports of the case made a great deal of the fact that Gacy lived and worked in the middle-class Chicago suburb of Norwood Park Township—where 27 bodies were found in the crawl space underneath his home. Far from being a “hooded stranger” who prowled the city blocks at midnight, Gacy—as was well-publicized by media coverage of the case—was liked by his neighbors and known to be a charity fund-raiser, practicing democrat, and basic all-round “pillar of the community.” He sometimes even worked as a children’s clown in local hospitals, another detail that was widely trumpeted in the publicity circus surrounding the case.

Another important case in the reconfiguration of America’s attitude toward suburbia was the story of Michelle Smith, author—with her psychiatrist (and now husband) Lawrence Pazder—of *Michelle Remembers*. In her book, Michelle writes about her childhood growing up in the 1950s in the neat, middle-class Canadian suburb of Victoria, British Columbia. On the outside, Michelle’s home was a white-painted house set among clipped hedges and suburban lawns. On the inside, however, she claims the house was an inferno of debauchery and murder, where babies were sacrificed, snakes and kittens mutilated, and the five-year-old Michelle—initiated by her mother into a Satanic ring in the basement of their home in 1955—was raped, tortured, kept in a cage, and forced to drink human blood at the altar of Satan.

Although *Michelle Remembers* has now been widely debunked as no more than a series of vivid fantasies, it was an international best-seller in 1987, and began

a wave of Satanic abuse hysteria in child care networks across the U.S. More long-lasting, perhaps, was the effect on the popular imagination of Michelle's description of a sinister cabal of middle-class, suburban Satanists—friendly, church-going neighbors by day and blood-drinking revelers by night. More than any other case, that of Michelle Smith was responsible for disseminating the popular myth that the majority of pedophiles and Satan-worshippers conceal themselves as lawyers, doctors, judges, housewives, and other of the many disguises worn by your friends and neighbors.

V. Perhaps the most interesting example of suburbs gone to seed is the case of Long Island. In *Picture Windows*, their history of suburbia, Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen trace the development of Long Island from farmland to leisure-class retreat to mass-marketed worker's paradise, stressing the race and class struggles that transformed the landscape of Walt Whitman's Paumanok into Levittown. For the postwar generation of baby boomers and their parents, Long Island was seen largely as a calm refuge away from the crime and violence of the big city. As its suburban developments expanded, however, the suburbs of Long Island became increasingly uniform and unimaginative, and further embedded in long-established patterns of racial segregation. This archetypal trap of suburban development may or may not be connected to the fact that since the 1980s various of the Long Island suburbs have been the unlikely location for a litany of bizarre crimes involving sex, Satanists, and serial killers.

This series of strange assaults began in the early hours of Saturday, May 29, 1982, when five men, all from Brooklyn, invaded a private house party in the suburb of Plainview, forced 20 people to take off their clothes, robbed them, and sexually abused the women. Then, in the summer of 1984, the body of 17-year-old Gary Lauwers was found stabbed to death in a wooded area near the suburb of Northport, in Suffolk county. The two killers, high-school dropouts Ricky Kasso, 17, and James Troiano, 18, were described by police as Satanists who frequently took large quantities of powerful hallucinogens. Kasso hanged himself two days after his arrest. In 1986, Selden High School Cheerleader Cheryl Pierson arranged to have a "home room hitman," Sean Pica, murder her father, allegedly to protect herself and her sister from sexual assaults.

On Christmas Eve of the same year, in the suburb of Huntington, not far from Northport, Matthew Solomon was convicted of killing his wife Lisa, stuffing her body into a plastic garbage bag, then pretending to take part in a neighborhood search for her. In the following year, 1988, Martin Tankleff murdered his parents in the suburb of Belle Terre, apparently because they wouldn't buy him a new car. Good Samaritan hospital in West Islip was the setting for the case of Richard Angelo, a 26-year-old nurse who came to be known as the "Angel of Death." Angelo was tried in 1989 for the deaths of seven patients by injecting them with muscle relaxants. In the same year, in the suburb of Valley Stream, the mutilated body of 13-year-old Kelly Anne Tinyes was found in the basement closet of a neighbor, 21-year-old Robert Golub, who was subsequently convicted of her murder.

In 1992, Amy Fisher—a 17-year-old high school senior dubbed the “Long Island Lolita”—was convicted of shooting and wounding the wife of her lover, auto mechanic Joey Buttafuoco. The case became a national media obsession; Fisher served seven years in jail for the crime, while Joey Buttafuoco left his wife and went to Hollywood to try his hand at movie stardom. The following year, Katie Beers, a 10-year-old from Mastic Beach, was rescued by police after being kidnapped by John Esposito and concealed for 16 days in a dungeon especially built for the purpose in Esposito’s Bay Shore home. In June 1993, an unemployed 34-year-old landscape gardener named Joel Rifkin was arrested after police found the dead body of Tiffany Bresciani in the back of his truck. Rifkin, a quiet loner who lived with his mother in the suburb of East Meadow, later confessed to the murders of 17 women, mostly prostitutes, making him New York State’s worst serial killer.

Other spectacular cases on Long Island include that of tennis coach Gary Wilensky, who built a dungeon in which he was planning to keep a teenaged tennis student, Jennifer Rhodes, with whom he was obsessed. A former schoolteacher from Melville became known as the “Cannibal Killer” after killing and eating one of his high school students. Jessica Hahn, the woman blamed for bringing down the empire of evangelist Jim Bakker, was born and raised in Massapequa, not far from the home of suburban killer Robert Reza, who mourned his wife’s murder by an “intruder” until he confessed to her killing, after an affair with his church organist. Amagansett was the home of Joseph Pikul, a cross-dressing spouse slayer, and local shut-in Walter Hudson made the headlines when his weight reached 1,200 pounds and his casket had to be lowered into the ground by crane.

In 1993, Bay Shore native Ron Rosenbaum expressed his shock at the way the unfashionable suburbs in which he grew up suddenly became a tabloid pandemonium:

What happened to the incredibly boring place I grew up in, where I swear *nothing ever happened?*

What happened to turn it into this charnel house of sensational spouse slayings; fatally attracted judges posing as lowlife, blackmailing private eyes sending condoms to mistresses’ daughters, horticultural serial killers? A veritable Babylon and not the colorless stop on the L.I.R.R. right after Amityville, Coptague and Lindenhurst, but a Babylon out of the Book of Revelation, the blood-drenched Mother of Abominations. (22)

After toying with various theories, Rosenbaum’s final explanation for the phenomenon is intriguing: he posits that Long Island is ahead of its time. Just as in the 1940s and ‘50s it was a pioneer of baby-boomer suburban development, in the 1980s and ‘90s Long Island embodied the future of America: wave after wave of suburban violence and crime. “And so,” concludes Rosenbaum,

the America that laughs at Long Island’s nonstop Satanist Demolition Derby, the America that looks down on Long Island as something alien, some exotic, carnivalesque pageant separable from its mainstream because it’s separate from the mainland, may have to think again. May have to learn to say of this unruly island what Prospero said of the unruly Caliban at the close of *The Tempest*: “This

thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." Because when America laughs at Long Island, it's laughing in the face of its own onrushing future." (22)

VI. The idea that suburbia may actually be not simply the location but the *cause* of violent crime has recently been championed by a cluster of "new urbanist" writings, including James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* and Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck's *Suburban Nation*. As Sandy Zipp explains, the new urbanists believe the American suburbs have gone completely to seed, and "those cheerful ranch houses arrayed in spotless, assembly-line rows on idyllic virgin land have mutated into swirling visions of McMansions, garage-fronted stucco shacks and cul-de-sacs pushing their way relentlessly into imperiled wetlands and forest belts." The "new urbanists" endorse the construction of smaller, mixed-use communities with fewer cars, fewer zoning laws, and more mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly communities of varied population, either free-standing as villages or grouped into towns and cities.

Many architects and city planners believe there is a profound connection between the structure of environments and the feelings and behavior of their inhabitants. New urbanist thinkers argue that America's sprawling suburban neighborhoods, with their detached, tract-style houses, regularly lead to social isolationism, loss of community, and a failure to communicate. This case is strengthened by evidence that, although inner city communities are still plagued by violence, random high school shootings like the one that took place in Columbine occur most frequently in white, suburban neighborhoods. And people *still* profess to be shocked that "such a terrible thing could happen in a quiet place like this."

Perhaps the first case in which suburban life was actually diagnosed as the *cause* of violent crime was that of John W. Hinckley, Jr., found "not guilty by reason of insanity" of attempting to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981. At the time of the assassination attempt, Hinckley was living with his parents in the affluent suburb of Evergreen, Colorado, in a large home with a swimming pool in the back yard and a private soda fountain. In Jack and Jo Ann Hinckley's book about the case, the prosecutor at the trial described their son as nothing more than "a bored young man with a lot of money" (323). At the time of his crime, Hinckley was under the care of his father's company psychiatrist, who considered him to be no different from many other suburban youngsters he'd treated over the years—lethargic, irresponsible, and lacking clear-cut goals for his life. Defense lawyers at the trial made much of Hinckley's "flat affect" and inability to respond to emotional stimuli in an appropriate manner, as well as his obvious boredom, apathy, indifference, and privilege. This condition was given the label *dementia suburbia*, a condition described by the defense as the cumulative effect of living twenty-five years with one's family in the American suburbs.

Rosenbaum's hypothesis about Long Island being the future of America may well be right, since the last ten years have seen a rash of spectacular suburban crimes. The most notorious of these include the O. J. Simpson murders, which took place in the ritzy suburb of Brentwood, Los Angeles; the murder of pageant queen Jonbenet Ramsey, which occurred in an elite suburb of Boulder, Colorado; and,

most recently, the abduction and murder of Danielle Van Dam in Sabre Springs, a quiet suburb of San Diego.

Even Bethesda, in the last ten years, has had its own share of spectacular violence. Just after midnight on October 18, 1992, a 23-year-old Harvard graduate named Laura Houghteling was murdered by a man who broke into her Bethesda home while she was sleeping. The killer turned out to be Hadden Clark, a local homeless man who sometimes worked as the family's gardener. Clark was also convicted of killing six-year-old Michelle Dorr, also after breaking into another private home in Bethesda. Clark, a trained chef with a propensity for drinking the blood drained from raw meat, confessed to cannibalizing parts of his victims in the hope that consuming female flesh would literally turn him into a woman. Even more spectacularly, Clark's older brother, Brad, is currently serving time in California for killing and cannibalizing a woman he invited over for dinner. According to crime writer Adrian Havill, Clark's crimes were motivated less by sexual excitement than his delusional longing to actually become a woman. In 1989 he was arrested—dressed in women's clothing—for stealing purses from a ladies' choir.

VII. It seems somehow appropriate, then, that in August 1986 the suburb of Carmelita should have been the location for an apocalypse that ripped the fronts off houses, revealing their insides to be more of a hell than even Hitchcock's Uncle Charlie could have imagined. It might have taken fifty years, but by the 1980s these brand new suburban communities, created virtually *ex nihilo*, had finally caught up with the rest of America by proving themselves, once and for all, apocalypse-worthy.

Notes

¹ See Woycik for a fascinating discussion of the secular apocalyptic implications of such films.

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