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Originally from Dorchester:

Arrivals and Departures in a Neighborhood

Kathleen Kilgore

I woke up a little groggy after several days of change and travel, alone in an apartment full of unpacked cardboard boxes. Sun poured through a small rectangle of stained glass I would later learn to call a “piano window.” I would also learn that the porches were “piazzas” (pee-ah-zas) and the heavy parlor sofa a “divan” (die-van). I was on the top floor of a three-story wooden structure with a boxy, carpenter’s imitation of a bowfront window sticking out of the wall of the front room. Across the narrow street I faced a row of nearly identical, detached brown or gray wooden triple boxes stacked on top of a foundation covered with wooden latticework. Each set of three had its own tiny fenced yard, clipped bushes, and a trimmed patch of grass. The yard across from me had an impressive hydrangea bush that took up more than half the available space, the blossoms blue from the acidic soil.

The triple houses were aging. Some needed paint, but all were perfectly clean. All the windows were hung with the filmy white rayon curtains my grandmother in Ohio used to wash in a bucket with Ivory Snow and hang on the lawn to dry. Behind the curtains were old yellow-paper window shades, the cords crocheted on the ends with roses or shamrocks. I thought of the Beatles song “Penny Lane” and was certain I was back in North London, somewhere near the flat where I stayed in Camden Town above the bachelor Irish laborer, the Pakistanis, and the Greek landlady. But the numbers on the black telephone that sat alone on the floor of the empty parlor were arranged in groups of three and four, instead of two and two. This meant I was in America. It was then that I remembered I was now married, and moving into my husband’s hometown: Dorchester, Massachusetts.

We had found our apartment in the usual Dorchester way, by word of mouth. Our Polish immigrant landlady had mentioned her empty top floor to my husband’s Irish immigrant aunt at the meat counter at Murphy’s Market. Aunt Rose was buying blood sausage (the “black and whites,” with grainy, black, congealed blood and tiny white circles of pork fat) while Mrs. Krajewski inspected the kielbasa. Mrs. Krajewski bemoaned the damage caused by the last tenant’s three small children while Aunt Rose extolled the virtues of her favorite nephew and his foreign (Maryland) bride. We were not consulted during the negotiations. Like an arranged marriage, real-estate

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deals were considered too sensitive to be left up to the actual participants. Aunt Rose simply gave us the address, the moving date, and an ornate front door key circa 1925.

Feeling responsible for bringing me in, both women tried their best to ease the transition of an outsider to both marriage and the neighborhood. Aunt Rose arrived with a pound of butter “for cooking and other purposes,” she said with a wink. Mrs. Krajewski invited me downstairs into a dining room stuffed with Victorian plush armchairs and antimacassars and a green budgie singing at the window, served me coffee with whipped cream and Eastern European pastry, and advised me to save my money for my old age. She had married, she told me, because she had been making only \$10 a week in a furniture factory and her suitor had been making nearly \$25 weekly as a plumber. By pooling their resources, they were able to buy a boardinghouse in the South End, which she ran until he died. A son had gone to MIT and a daughter to Radcliffe. “I don’ marry him because he good looking. No! I marry him because he got twenty-five dollars week.” The marriage had lasted. Her daughter, who married American-style for love, was divorced.

I arrived in late fall, and soon a uniformly gray winter set in—too soon, for the wool coat that barely covered my miniskirt did nothing to block the wind that was blowing off Boston Harbor as I stood on the open platform waiting for the MBTA train. I bought boots and a tweed “maxi-coat” that hung nearly to my ankles, but my ninety-eight-pound frame still shivered as the Bluebird cars crawled around the curve of Dorchester Bay. Through some mysterious space-time compression, the train was visible and moving but appeared to go more and more slowly the colder the day. I never did fully adjust to New England winters, though I did create survival strategies involving sheepskin coats, down vests, electric blankets, thermal underwear, and winter jogging. Underneath all the protective layers, no matter how much I cultivated a positive attitude and exercised, my feet were cold from December through March.

In November, the snows came. The old frame house trembled at night when the wind was off the sea, and the wooden frames rattled behind the thin film of plastic we tacked up for storm windows. The city snowplows never reached our dead-end street. Planned before cars came to the masses, the neighborhood included enough street parking for about one-third of its cars. When the snow was more than a dusting, the man of the household would dig a parking space for the car. When he left for work, his wife would rush out to mark the spot with an old trash can, a broken kitchen chair, or a rickety table. Strangers parked there at the risk of having their tires deflated, or worse. At the first snowstorm, we decided we were above this petty system. We dug out a space and left it unmarked; the street should be free for all. Somebody promptly parked in it. Then another space, and we ended up parking half a mile away, by the beach. By the third snowfall, we were putting out a trash can, too. You had to be careful with your choice of can. If it wasn’t dented enough, it might disappear along with the space. A really banged-up barrel meant you were serious about the defense of your territory. And we were serious. Unlike the other newlyweds we met, we planned to stay.

In 1969, I arrived in Savin Hill, just as everyone else was leaving. The winter skies were tattered and cold, in a close correspondence with the feel of the man-made landscape. While my husband was overseas in the navy and in graduate school, his hometown had been sliding downhill. He wondered why he had risked his life in Vietnam while his own neighborhood was sinking from a tight, immigrant village into a statistical “inner city.” What was the use of defending the ramparts while, inside,

home decayed? After we met and married in graduate school, he decided to return to Savin Hill instead of joining the Foreign Service as he had planned. I moved from my dorm into the triple decker.

Savin Hill then, as now, was really two neighborhoods. In the early 1950s, the Southeast Expressway bisected the community between the MBTA and the lower ledges of the hill (once Rock Hill) for which the area was named. A low, two-lane bridge lined with screening to prevent kids from throwing rocks on passing motorists crossed over the eight-lane roaring chasm. Traffic was fast, wild as Manhattan, and constant, with eighteen-wheelers weaving in and out of the commuter lanes. The first few times I ventured across the narrow sidewalk, it felt like crossing a jungle river on a rope bridge. Thick, black-rubber dust coated all the surfaces of the bridge, the same particles that cover spectators too close to the track at auto races. In 1969, the two-thirds of the inner belt that been planned to take the heat off the Southeast Expressway had not been built—and never would be. In 1971, Governor Frank Sargent halted all new city highway construction. The noise never stopped. Even in the hours just before dawn, you could hear the whine of the semis.

Our apartment was a good six blocks from the escarpment, yet on warm nights, the back porch vibrated with a low-pitched hum. I used to dream that all the cars had vanished and that my neighbors were riding bicycles, waving and smiling, on a spring morning, over the pitted macadam. My first few weekends away on Cape Cod, I slept as if drugged by the sudden silence.

The expressway also intensified a social-class division. In my first week, I tried to cash a personal check at Murphy's Market. The clerk hesitated until I gave her my address. "Ah, you're from Over the Bridge. Then it's okay." The Victorian mansions of Savin Hill had been built at opposite ends of the neighborhood. The great houses along Pleasant Street, near the advancing black community, had run down into rooming houses, funeral parlors, and apartments. The side streets near central Dorchester Avenue were still in good shape, but the blocks of triple deckers closer to the expressway had deteriorated. Maryland Street, near the station, was home to a family of bikers. For months, an unattached toilet sat on the front lawn of their Maryland Street home, along with a sodden sofa, a van on cinderblocks, and a lovingly cared-for stable of Harleys. But once you crossed Over the Bridge, the housing stock improved noticeably. Although the neighborhood had turned Irish in the 1920s, a few Yankees still held out near the beach in clapboard Victorian Gothics full of antique furniture and threadbare Oriental rugs. The Yankee ladies did much of the community volunteer work—the Red Cross, the Cancer Society, the March of Dimes—and were overrepresented on all the neighborhood boards and committees. Kit Clark, née Forbes, was one of the best-liked women in the neighborhood, an indefatigable worker for local causes. When she died in middle age of cancer, the civic association voted to name a local senior citizens' agency after her, and Kit Clark House became one of the larger nonprofits in Dorchester.

But the trend from the time I arrived through the early seventies was down. Virtually all of my husband's contemporaries had moved to the suburbs as soon as their children were born. The first baby would be baptized in Dorchester and grow up in Weymouth. We would run into them on weekends when they returned to visit their parents, and sometimes we would drive out to winding South Shore streets at night with a road atlas, looking for garrison colonial houses in mazes of developments with names like Fern Hill and Blueberry Acres. The men would drink beer in the beige wall-to-wall

carpeted living room while I helped the hostess load the avocado-colored dishwasher in her stencil-bordered country kitchen. The only part I envied was the dishwasher. My dishwashing equipment consisted of a plastic pan in a white enameled cast-iron three-legged sink that required regular infusions of Drano and bleach. The dinner conversation would start with nostalgia for the band, the nuns, the gang fights between the Shannons, the Red Devils, the Red Raiders, and the occasional visiting Italian from East Boston. By dessert, the suburban family would be worrying out loud about Mom and Dad left behind. Where would they go? Mrs. Murphy had been mugged coming home from the 8:00 a.m. mass. Mrs. Finnerty had fallen and broken her hip on the ice.

One grandmother on my street tried moving in with her suburban son as live-in babysitter, but the carless isolation drove her back in six months. If one had influence in city government, there were clean and safe apartments in brick “elderly projects” that presented a sharp contrast to the dismal “family projects.” A special city bus ferried the privileged senior citizens to the grocery store, on day trips, to bingo, and—most important—to the polls on election day. Not all elderly were willing to be packed off to apartments, however. Some clung to their old houses and, even if a young family wanted to buy one, wouldn’t sell. The neighborhood weakened and aged, and forcibly resisted change.

“If they were building the Vatican in Savin Hill, the community would be against it,” an exasperated developer told me years ago. And no one prodded people into more positive views. The neighborhood’s state representative, traditionally a figure of considerable local clout, had become House Speaker, then state attorney general, and was aiming at the governorship. The City Council and School Committee were then elected at large, and no members came from the neighborhood. The mayor lived on Beacon Hill, as remote as the president in the White House. The pastor of the parish church had become old and irascible. While he said mass, his pet Labrador retriever lay in the aisle; communicants stepped carefully over it without complaint. He broke hearts when he abruptly canceled the parish’s award-winning CYO band on the grounds that he had found dirty words written on the bathroom walls in the parochial school. It was not the *words*, he explained, so much as the fact that the school was sanctified church property. Small signs posted in the basement reminded pupils that “writing on the walls is a sin.”

In a small effort to attract kids to the parish church, we spent several Sundays driving a crew-cut Maryknoll seminarian with a guitar from Hingham to Dorchester to teach the teenagers a folk mass. As soon as we had rehearsed enough to perform, the monsignor canceled the program. There was no recourse. His attitude remained the same as it had been when he read the pastoral letter defining the “sign of peace.” “A handshake or a kiss,” he had read aloud from the altar with disdain. “Well, there’ll be none of that in *this parish!*” he announced. We did not even dare shake hands. There was no sign of peace then. Instead, all over the neighborhood, there were signs of the coming war.

There was more involved in the resistance to change than just the aging process. I heard the sound I thought I had left behind with the sixties in the South: Jefferson’s old alarm bell in the night. Dorchester was becoming a “changing neighborhood.” The black ghetto, denied access to other areas by bank redlining, had already pushed the Jews from Mattapan into Randolph and Sharon and was spilling into the edges of

Dorchester. "North Dorchester" became the code words for "black," though integration was not confined to the north but spread in a ragged front line through the poorest housing on the main avenues and into the slumlord blocks. In Savin Hill, the Irish still predominated, though there was a scattering of Poles, Lithuanians, Italians, and Swedes. No blacks yet. But there were signs and portents.

As I walked to the station one morning, I stepped over the swastika spray-painted onto the concrete in front of the public school. "Nigers Suck" it read. The school janitor slathered it with gooey paint remover and stood waiting for it to soak in. "Ah, it's just them kids," he assured me. "Troublemakers." But the scrawls reappeared each night, edging closer and closer to the school building. In a few months, the School Department's maintenance men gave up trying to erase the paint from the old brick and simply supplied matching brick-colored paint. The school acquired a painted band eight feet high around the first story, kept shiny from repeated applications of new paint.

When the signs appeared on the sidewalk of my own street the first summer, I tried to scrub them off with a brush and Spic & Span, but the color only faded slightly. Seasons of snow and acid rain have since obliterated every trace. While I worked with my kitchen brush and plastic bucket, none of my neighbors came out to help, to comment, or even to dissuade me. I felt more foolish than heroic in the hot sun. Trying to talk to them about the signs was just as useless. They stepped around the topic as neatly as Irish people avoided all conversation about the "troubles in the North." Whatever you say, say nothing. The dreaded busing might not come at all. Until the moment came, they would wait and hope that their elected representatives, who had promised to sacrifice themselves even to jail, could hold back the tide.

A few dissenters broke the general silence. My mother-in-law, born near the Ulster border in Donegal, was staunchly outspoken. She took her cue from the catechism of her childhood. The black saint Martin de Porres stood in a place of honor beside the bust of James Michael Curley, under the Bachrach portrait of JFK and the Sacred Heart. "We are all God's children," she would announce loudly if a guest dared say anything that could be construed as a racist remark. "When I first come out from Ireland, I went to a party at a lovely home on Gallivan Boulevard," she would begin. The family could have recited the rest of the anecdote by heart but maintained a respectful silence. "And the host, who I am ashamed to say was an Irishman, says to me, 'This is a fine neighborhood, Mary, and not a Jew for miles around.' What manner of Christian would say that?" she asked rhetorically, and never received an answer. When Cardinal Medeiros issued the Covenant for Racial Harmony, she wore the red covenant button with its olive branch on her Donegal tweed jackets. Her home was burglarized not long after, and almost all her jewelry taken. Except the tin button. "They left me the best," she said, and wore it until she died.

At the other extreme from Nana were the neighborhood's self-appointed defenders. Savin Hill Station was their Maginot Line. Two doors down from the tollbooth stood Eddie Connors's tavern. South Boston residents tell you that their neighborhood has a bar for every day of the year. I've never counted, but Dorchester has a fair number of them too, and they run the gamut from respectable pubs with a wine list and traditional Irish music on Saturday nights to unlicensed private hangouts for aspiring hoods. All I ever actually saw of Connors's tavern was an open door and a glimpse, over the shoulders of a fat man leaning against the doorframe, smoking, of a black interior smelling of stale beer. No one ever stood straight up within a twelve-foot radius of

the doorway; maybe they couldn't.

Connors himself was reputed to have been the inspiration for George Higgins's first novel, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. The tavern was the place to go for a very cheap color television or stereo, but one night the place burned under mysterious circumstances. A man sleeping upstairs was killed in the fire. Undeterred, Connors opened a bigger establishment across the street called Bulldogs, a short time before he was shot in a telephone booth at a gas station on Morrissey Boulevard a mile away.

The crowd that partied late at Bulldogs was tough, even by local standards. A close friend of mine decided to move to the suburbs after watching a group at closing time chase a stranger in their car, run him down, back up, and hit him again until he stopped moving. She called the police, without results. One summer afternoon, I watched as a squad car pulled up and encountered five or six Bulldogs patrons standing outside the door with baseball bats; they weren't headed for the baseball diamond near the beach. The cop put the bats into the cruiser and drove off, but the men did not disperse. If you were black or Asian, you were careful not to get off at Savin Hill.

By spring of my first year in Dorchester, just as I began to get my bearings in the neighborhood, I was thrown into the midst of a political campaign: my husband had entered the race for the Ninth Congressional seat. Savin Hill was only a small part of the district, to which Dorchester as a whole was the key. I began to learn that Dorchester, though superficially a homogeneous section of old frame houses, was really a loose confederation of neighborhoods, named both for the churches that faced its major streets and for the old Yankee farms and towns the city had engulfed as it expanded. The older names were rural and prosaic: Five Corners, Lower Mills, Clam Point, Jones Hill, Meetinghouse Hill, Fields Corner. The churches dominated each neighborhood architecturally, strong Gothic inspirations to the immigrants clustered around them and built so close to each other that parishioners could all walk to mass, although the only time most of them did so was in the midst of blizzards. Over the Yankee countryside spread the hagiography of the immigrants: St. Kevin's, St. Margaret's, St. William's, St. Mark's, St. Gregory's, St. Ann's, St. Brendan's.

Only once a year, in the first week of June, the separate fiefdoms united for Dorchester Day. The event was planned year round by the Dorchester Allied Veterans Council in a storefront headquarters across from St. Mark's. Two years ago, the council created my favorite fund-raising item: a red tractor cap sporting the gold-embroidered legend "After Dorchester there is Only Heaven." During hard times, it made me think of the motto sewn onto satin bowling jackets in Saigon: "I know I'll go to Heaven because I've already been to Hell." More financially successful than the cap was the annual hundred-dollar-a-ticket banquet, with a drawing for \$10,000. When the lottery got down to two possible winners, they were offered the chance to split the proceeds. But they always refused. Most of the dinner guests were politicians, amateur or professional. They knew that when the count was over, there should only be one winner. No matter how good they were, the rest were losers.

The parade route began at the southern border of Dorchester in Lower Mills, assembling with the tinkling of chimes and random tooting of the brass bands in the CVS parking lot, the Knights of Columbus Hall yard, and spilling over into the quiet side streets while the locals toted aluminum folding chairs and coolers to curbside. The line of march followed the five miles of Dorchester Avenue and what was once the horse-drawn trolley line straight to the northern border with South Boston. Though the first week of June can be chilly in Boston, on the day of the parade it was always as

hot as mid-August. The skin designed by thousands of years of natural selection for overcast Ireland reddened painfully under layers of suntan lotion. Kids whined for popsicles, and the politicians' wives trudged the long uphill course, uncomplaining, in high heels, polyester dresses, and linen blazers while their husbands crisscrossed the street from one group to another, pressing flesh: "Howahya? How's the family? That's great! Good to see ya."

The parade had its constants and its variables. There were always plenty of Catholic high school bands. Elected officials marched free of charge with only a backup of a couple of front men and a convertible with a hand-lettered sign advertising the pol and the car dealer who owned the car. But nonincumbents had to sponsor a band. The competition to sponsor Dorchester bands was tough, and, in desperation, some aspirants paid to bus in Catholic teenagers from as far away as Rhode Island. The instrumentalists sweated in their year-round long-sleeved uniforms while the baton twirlers in leotards and little boots cartwheeled in the vanguard, followed by a second rank of standard bearers and an honor guard carrying white-painted wooden rifles. There was a natural progression: white rifle bearer, active service unit, and then at last the wheelchair unit of the DAV or the marching veterans.

All the services sent bands and spit-and-polish drill units, and some years there were tanks as well as jeeps, personnel carriers, trucks, and heavy artillery pieces. The kids went wild over the tanks and the roaring diesel engines and clouds of exhaust. But the DPW complained that the treads chewed up the asphalt. Behind the shiny army, navy, air force, and marine marching units came the veterans' posts in ever-tighter uniforms and embroidered forage caps. The Vietnam veterans marched apart from the clean-shaven troops of World War II and the Korean Conflict. "What the hell do they think this is, a Che Guevara look-alike contest?" I heard one VFW soldier complain as the Vietnam Veterans of America walked by in wrinkled fatigues, out of step, lean and bearded, still carrying their black POW-MIA flag and their undying rage.

Last summer, a Vietnam veterans group from New Hampshire carried the three red stripes on a golden field banner of South Vietnam. As the men saluted, the Dorchester Vietnamese families fell silent, and their neighbors clapped and cheered. Near Savin Hill, a frail and elderly Asian shouted to the veterans, "Thank you! You help us." Always the biggest hand went to a wizened Filipino NCO whose chest was almost completely covered by decorations and who was standing bolt upright in an open jeep, with a sign proclaiming his body count — he had personally killed over four hundred Japanese. He held on to a metal bar with one hand and to the head of a cane with the other, his face stiff with scar tissue, never smiling or turning his head as the waves of applause surged over him.

The military always predominated, though other themes entered the composition. Social-service agencies usually sponsored a display on a flatbed truck. Disc jockies, rock bands, and bars borrowed tractor trailers and pickup trucks and filled them with teenagers in tight cutoffs swaying to recorded rock music. Each year, Boston Gas presented the same truck disguised as a steam locomotive, blaring a recording of "The Montreal Express." The Budweiser Clydesdales drew loud cheering. Irish Northern Aid marched with the flags of each county, a few men wearing the traditional black beret and dark glasses of the secret army. Along the route, an occasional illegal immigrant would cheer them with "Up the Republic!" But most of the spectators shrugged them off: "What the hell are they fightin' for anyway?" Last year, outside Katie's Tavern, one of the regular patrons watched mystified as the county flags and the

banner "Ireland Unfree Shall Never Be at Peace" passed him by. As County Meath stepped by him, he drew himself up and shouted, "I'm Irish too!" The crowd roared, but none of the marchers smiled at all.

After a particularly brutal racial killing five years ago, we helped organize a contingent of Dorchester Residents for Racial Harmony to show the flag in the annual event. The women sewed the blue and white banner in my parlor while the men argued about politics in the kitchen. There were tense meetings with civic association members and pols who considered us "provocative." And a few open threats. I didn't sleep at all the night before the parade. It was a hot night, but at dawn, a cold wind blew through and the heavens opened. It didn't just rain, it flooded Dorchester in gray sheets all day long. The parade was canceled for the year, and we were spared.

Last summer, the activists marched with banners, blue and yellow balloons, and stilt walkers in Central American carnival costumes, for peace in Nicaragua and El Salvador. They were cheered, not wildly, but politely. No one called them Communists or traitors. And the military bands, the Filipino Chief, and the veterans marched with them.

Dorchester seemed to hit its bottom in 1975, about the time we left Savin Hill to move into the vacant house we bought at auction from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Federally funded programs to promote poor and minority ownership in Dorchester had failed on a massive scale. Realtors bought low from panicked white owners and sold high to poor people who didn't have the means to replace the old furnaces and roofs. Every Sunday, the real-estate section of the *Globe* featured columns of HUD foreclosures to be sold at auction. We were looking at run-down mansions in Ashmont Hill when a realtor spotted a single-family offered in Lower Mills near his brother's house. The neighborhood was safe, he assured us, for our two-year-old. We could have the whole house for the price of the down payment on a suburban home.

The wooden Greek revival house was covered with alligator-scaled white paint. A chimney leaned crazily, and shreds of grayed curtain hung at the broken windows. The heat had been off for a year, and the empty rooms stank of mold. I shook my head. This was worse than my student digs in Camden Town. Upstairs, the sun was shining through three tall windows in a pink-walled room with clean oak flooring. Outside the window stood a tree in the sticky-bud stage of early spring. Below, in the scrubby patch of front yard, the first tulip and daffodil shoots were coming up. "This could be Mariah's room," the realtor said.

We arrived as most of our neighbors were trying to sell out, pushed by busing and blockbusting. Two houses within a three-block radius of ours were firebombed when blacks moved in. On our walks, we passed the shell of the garage where a gutted car stood. The springs of the seats poked through the ashes of the upholstery, and the plastic steering wheel had melted down like Dali's dripping watches. The Fire Department ruled that the cause was careless disposal of smoking materials. "Let's go see the burned-up car!" Mariah would squeal. The neighborhood fears were not groundless; black teenagers broke into houses and snatched purses in broad daylight. No one seemed able to stop them.

Within a month, a neighbor presented me with a written promise, for my signature, not to sell to blacks. I was too much a coward to refuse him outright, offering instead to show it to my lawyer. He quickly took back the paper. Within a year, he had sold out and moved to Plymouth. Another neighbor ran an informal real estate agency in the parish rectory to "keep the right kind of people here." She moved to Milton.

All the neighborhood children attended parochial school or boycotted. Mariah was bused to Roxbury. “Mariah rides the nigger bus!” chanted kids in plaid uniforms. “You ain’t a fuckin’ child of Mary,” one little blonde used to say. Mariah developed a hard right cross and a solid core of friends from our block. She became the best white double-Dutch jumper at her school. I made friends too, helped with the civic association, a day-care center, boards and committees, and a Protestant church; and I wrote. A fictional St. Buadan’s Parish took shape, where teenagers threw rocks at buses and the ordinary parishioners soldiered on with second jobs, big families, car payments, oil bills, and fear.

Such desperation cried out for rescuers, and in the mid-seventies, Dorchester attracted programs and projects, storefront centers and task forces, ministers, students, former radicals, poverty lawyers, and political organizers from all across the spectrum. “To the Ashmont Station!” we used to joke when a new reformer came to town. The route was convenient; from Cambridge you didn’t even have to change trains at Park Street. I would sit in thrift-shop chairs in the parlors of dilapidated triple-decker communes and proceed to lecture incoming do-gooders on how to win the hearts and minds of the white working-to-middle class. Cut your hair (mine was over two feet long); don’t smoke dope (here I wasn’t a hypocrite—I couldn’t even smoke a legal cigarette); don’t use profanity; and attend the Catholic church (I attended the Unitarian). When the struggles of scratching for foundation grants, organizing the apathetic poor into futile rent strikes, and living day by day in a relentlessly discouraging environment wore down the reformers and they went back to Cambridge, I dismissed them, as the pols did, as “losers.” But they had laid the groundwork for the neighborhood’s renaissance. The generation that fled to the South Shore did not return. And Dorchester did not become an extension of the black ghetto. Instead, we got the “gentry.”

The process started with architects buying Victorian homes in Ashmont Hill and along the old “millionaire’s row,” Melville Avenue. When the available mansions were renovated, the process spread to more modest singles, doubles, and even triple deckers. The newcomers joined the old civic associations, volunteered to do all the legwork, and even fielded their own candidates. No yuppie has actually been *elected* yet, but that day will come. House prices shot up, and national realty firms opened local offices.

This June, the prices peaked, and all summer long aspiring real-estate tycoons left their engraved calling cards on my porch. For a couple of months, they were as common as Jehovah’s Witnesses and aluminum-siding salesmen. The boom petered out in September, but prices leveled off, instead of declining. A college teacher and his wife and their small child moved in next door. Their three-year-old looks just like mine did the year we moved, and her home is now the central gathering place for the preschool generation, as mine once was. She reads to them and gives them nutritionally balanced sugar-free snacks; then they go home and watch violent cartoons on television and eat Twinkies. The same kids who taunted Mariah about the nigger bus come over to hang out in her room and listen to her tape from the Miami Sound Machine.

The same women who warned me not to let Mariah on the bus now gossip with me in the grocery store. We adopted a Vietnamese boy, a black family moved in at the end of the street, and Vietnamese families moved in, and no one objected. Maybe it was just a question of time. Maybe we all got tired of the bullshit, a neighbor said to me not long ago. That seems as good an explanation as any.

I used to pray for the day a college graduate would move in so that I'd have someone to talk to. But I found that I changed before the neighborhood did. My closest friend now is a graduate of Dorchester High, and she reads more than most of my educated contemporaries do. I miss the family who sold to the college professor. The patriarch was a small-time paving contractor and bookie who lived with his wife, mother-in-law, daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren and four dogs. When the population pressure was too great, "Papa" would announce that he was going in the doghouse and retire to the peace of an old brown Fleetwood propped on cinderblocks under a maple tree in the back yard. With his youngest grandchild in his lap and a six-pack on the seat beside him, he would doze off listening to the racing results on the car radio, and let the rest of the world go by. On hot nights, the whole family would barbecue greasy Italian sausages and onions and drink while the kids splashed in the above-ground pool and yelled in the dark. The new people cook inside and make their children to bed, even in August, whether they are sleepy or not.

It's almost fashionable now to say that you live in Dorchester. Almost. The newcomers play "can you top this" by bragging about how cheaply they bought their houses five years ago. For those who left too soon, a local newspaper sells bumper stickers proclaiming "Originally from Dorchester," or just the mystifying initials "O.F.D." By filling out a form that includes a space for "original neighborhood" and sending in \$10, an official O.F.D. receives not only a bumper sticker but also an official membership plaque and card.

Each June, the parade goes on. Though the marchers seem constant, the landscape they pass by is changing. For twenty years and more, Dorchester Avenue has been a featureless, straight track lined with gas stations, bars, liquor stores, convenience stores, and triple deckers. The stretch from the Adelpia Tavern ("home of the Greek Pu-Pu Platter!") and Dong Phung (Eastern food) to South Boston is so unrelentingly ugly that a Burger King was welcomed by the abutters as an improvement. This year a city councillor and a state representative organized the Dorchester Area Revitalization Team (DART). Their first target is the twenty-odd auto body shops and used car lots that line Dot Ave. Market forces are at work, too. Across from Ashmont Station, two late-nineteenth-century commercial buildings have been stripped of their vinyl siding and neon lights, reshingled, and decorated with gilded wooden signs. If the developer makes his 25 percent, more will follow.

I drove back to Savin Hill a few weeks ago to work on a story. Just over the bridge, along the escarpment of the expressway, a local developer had built a cluster of luxury brick townhouses. They were sold even before the open house was held, some for more than \$200,000. The school where the "troublemakers" painted swastikas has been turned into condominiums. The few empty lots have sprouted single-family homes that would not be out of place in Wellesley Hills, and the abandoned cable factory beside the MBTA tracks is going to be converted to apartments. Bulldogs is still in business, and the expressway is noisier than ever. From a new townhouse window, I was looking out at the curve of Dorchester Bay, the gas tanks, the railroad tracks, and the peeling ironwork of the MBTA station. "Who would pay so much money for a view like that?" I asked.

"It's an urban landscape," the developer answered. "Like the view from a city loft. You see, it all depends on your point of view." 🐾