that brought me to that house. To some extent, this is because my parents didn't want me to know. (Alcoholism, mental illness, poverty, and fraud figure in the fragments I've picked up from both sides of the family.) I don't doubt that the move to Long Island was principally a matter of devotion to my sister and me, but I suspect it also represented an opportunity for them to clean the slate, to start over. Indeed, every trip we made back to the city to visit my relatives' apartments somehow seemed like a trip back in time, our car a sealed capsule protecting us from a harsh frontier environment that would swallow us up if we ever broke down or even stopped. I was always a little afraid, and always a little excited, by the visits.

Looking back now, however, I see their flight from Queens—and our forays back there—in a less heroic light. Although racial and class segregation have more or less become a given in U.S. history, I feel shame about my essentially segregationist beginnings—as well as a sense of shame about my shame over my parents' actions. I have tried to take refuge in any number of justifications: that they were far from unusual; that the concerns they had about educational safety and quality were legitimate in their own right; that my father could say not only that some of his best friends were black but that he in fact had pulled black and Latino children out of burning buildings; and so on. At the very least, the facts surrounding my childhood complicate my nostalgia.

But if I cannot in good conscience straightforwardly celebrate this myth, I don't regard it as an outright lie, either. Frequent statements to the contrary, the United States was never a "free," "open," or "virgin" land. It has, nevertheless, afforded opportunities for a great many people (including some black and Latino people, among others) to do something that was previously difficult, if not impossible: acquire a place they could call their own.

"The American Dream of owning a home," we call it. No American Dream has broader appeal, and no American Dream has been quite so widely realized. Roughly two-thirds of Americans owned their homes at the start of this century, and it seems reasonable to believe that many of the remaining third will go on to do so. And if, like other American Dreams, this one is imperfect, even fatally flawed, it is also extraordinarily resilient and versatile. My story was only a fragment in a late chapter of what had already been a very long story.

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land. A land of wheat, and barley and vines, and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil olive and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass.

—Deuteronomy 8:7–9, King James Bible, 1611

In the beginning, there was land. The United States of today may be a "welfare" state, but as Dorothee Kocks reminds us in her evocative book *Dream a Little*, it began as a frontier state. If the basic currency of the welfare state was cash, the coin of the realm in the frontier state was land. For much of American history, in fact, land was a more practical and accessible financial instrument than cash, which was rare, unstable, and, given the lack of a national currency, difficult to use. While other goods could function as a medium of exchange (the wampum of Indians and tobacco of farmers, for example), land was of particular importance very early in American history.

Land, however, was not always viewed as a desirable or even obvious commodity. At least initially, many indigenous American peoples thought land could no more be bought or sold than the air they breathed or the water they drank. Spanish and French colonists typically measured wealth in terms of the gold, fish, furs, or other forms of wealth they—or in many cases, their slaves—extracted from North America and shipped home for mercantile purposes. Controlling land was of course important for such enterprises, but more as an instrumental means to an end than something to be prized in its own right—particularly because so much of their dominions consisted of deserts, bayous, forests, mountain ranges, or other environments that seemed unprofitable at best and dangerous at worst.

Still, even many of these people knew that land, particularly arable land, could produce great wealth as well as confer less direct benefits for strategically minded generals, evangelically minded missionaries, or thrill-seeking adventurers. Moreover, land was a cheap way for imperial governments to court or reward important subjects. From the beginning, then, in America not only was an abstraction such as money important, but so too was the development of a particular place where a variety of people could transform, acquire, or lose lives.

Cities like Houston (25 to 556), Indianapolis (11 to 279), and San Antonio (36 to 267) are comparable.

The reluctance of many communities to integrate with cities reflects the growing class and racial segregation of the nation's metropolitan areas, a segregation apparent everywhere from the types of work being done to the types of music being listened to. At the same time, however, what may be most striking about the course of urbanization and suburbanization in the United States is the degree to which it cut across American society as a whole. Horace Greeley of "Go west, young man" fame had it backwards: as industrialization proceeded, the country was not the safety valve for the city, but rather the *city* served as a refuge from the *country*. And, increasingly, the suburb served as a refuge from both.

Wherever they happened to live, Americans seemed united by an exceptional penchant for home ownership. It is notable, but perhaps not coincidental, that the greatest fervor appeared to come from immigrants. One study of Detroit, for example, showed that in 1900, 55 percent of Germans, 46 percent of the Irish, and 44 percent of Poles owned their own homes—figures that would have been virtually inconceivable in Europe at the time, particularly in Ireland and (what was once) Poland, whose residents were often virtual prisoners of foreign powers. In the immigrant-laden Massachusetts city of Newburyport in the 1930s, Irish and Italians tended to make home ownership an even greater priority than their children's educations; the percentage of those with property holdings who lived in the city for twenty years ranged from 63 to 78 percent. Still another study, this one of cities with more than a hundred thousand residents at the turn of the century, found that the proportion of immigrants who owned their own homes ranged from 11 percent in New York City to 58 percent in Toledo. Among the native-born, by contrast, 15 percent owned homes in New York City; the figure reached 40 percent in Los Angeles. As one noted historian, Kenneth Jackson, has observed, "Obviously variation by city and by ethnic group was enormous, but from an international perspective what is most important about these statistics is that it was not a native-American, or middle-class, or urban phenomenon, but an American phenomenon." Moreover, Jackson noted, while African Americans tended to encounter discrimination that blunted their own aspirations for home owning, and Jews' religious practices tended

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toward group cohesion, all other ethnic groups were migrating to suburbia in the early decades of the twentieth century.

A number of interrelated factors contributed to the widespread opportunities for home ownership. Some, like the plenitude of wood on a continent whose forests had not been denuded, were intrinsic to the land itself. Others were more technological. The advent of the balloon frame house in the 1830s in Chicago revolutionized American architecture by making housing far cheaper and simpler to construct. (The characteristic wooden beams that define a building long before it is finished continue to be widespread in American contracting into the twenty-first century.) Still other factors were economic: though one often hears assertions about cheap labor being crucial for national economic health, the United States was to a great degree a country built on high wages, which not only stimulated labor-saving technological innovation but also gave workers sufficient wages to buy houses, which furthered economic development still more. Finally, the elaboration of a transportation infrastructure effectively brought more (and cheaper) land within the purview of a metropolitan area, creating an ever-widening radius of housing within commuting distance of cities.

All these elements were firmly in place by 1900. At that point, though, a new element appeared on the scene that would have a transformative effect: the automobile. Its impact on American society in general and on suburbs in particular has been so great that it is hard to believe that suburbs were really suburbs without it.

At the most fundamental level, the car transformed the physical geography of the metropolis. Before, the organizing principle had been the rail line extending outward. Now, however, the suburbs were defined not so much by a radius from the center as by a circumference circling it (like the Beltway that loops around Washington, D.C.). Cars also transformed the built environment, whether in the growing prominence of the garage or in the oversized signs, parking lots, shopping centers, or other kinds of architecture that were specifically designed to attract motorists. They also hastened the decline of cities by decentralizing many of their social functions and by draining financial resources away from their infrastructure. (The proverbial story of the huge Los Angeles rail system, eviscerated by funding for highways, comes to mind.)

Like the house, the car became widely celebrated as an emblem of democracy even for those who had not yet acquired one, and for many of the same reasons. As with housing, cars were the focus of endless technological refinement. They also became relatively less expensive over time, allowing virtually all families (and even individuals) to acquire them. Like houses, too, cars were typically bought on borrowed money, which was lent in large measure because relatively high wages permitted it and in turn provided an ever-expanding market for those who sold them and related products. And Americans took to cars as passionately—and perhaps as irrationally—as they did to houses. "We'd rather do without clothes than give up the car," one working-class housewife told researchers Robert and Helen Lynd in their classic 1937 study of Muncie, Indiana. "I'll go without food before I'll see us give up a car," asserted another. Such sentiments were impressive when one considers them in light of the relatively severe economic conditions that preceded and followed that era, but car ownership, like home ownership, points to one more distinctively American trait: relative wealth. When Soviet authorities tried to discredit American capitalism by showing the 1940 film *The Grapes of Wrath*—a movie whose emotional power derives from a story line about the homelessness of displaced tenant farmers—it was yanked out of theaters after six weeks when it became clear that viewers were more impressed by the fact that the impoverished Joad family nevertheless owned a family car. Literally and figuratively, the automobile embodied personal mobility, and as such was the perfect complement for the anchorage provided by a privately owned homestead.

The most important contribution of the automobile to suburbia, however, may have had less to do with its use than with its means of construction. Henry Ford revolutionized American manufacturing by exploiting the principles of assembly line manufacture for what was at the time an extremely complex consumer appliance. But could the same techniques of mass manufacturing—control over large quantities of raw materials, a fixed sequence of assembly using fewer workers, economies of scale to lower per-unit price, and sufficient capital to provide financing for a wider array of buyers—be used to construct residential housing?

Abraham Levitt knew the answer. Levitt and his sons William and Alfred had been relatively small-scale contractors before the Second World War, when they received a government contract to build more than two thousand homes for war workers in Norfolk, Virginia. The experience, which proved difficult, nevertheless allowed them to

develop a system for laying dozens of foundations every day and preassembling walls and roofs. Just as important, the coming economic forecast—which included a huge demand for housing in the wake of the Great Depression and the end of the Second World War, as well as the prospect of government aid to veterans and others—made the construction of large housing developments appear to be a worthwhile gamble. Returning to Long Island after the war, they built some high-priced residential housing but also acquired a four-thousand-acre tract of potato fields in the township of Hempstead. Their development, which was known at the time as Island Trees, was soon renamed Levittown.

The formula was simple. Trucks dropped off building materials at sixty-foot intervals. All the houses had concrete foundations (no cellars), asphalt floors, and rock-board walls. Freight cars delivered Levitt-owned timber to lumberyards, where one man could cut parts for ten houses in a day. The houses were constructed in twenty-seven steps by workers who specialized in particular jobs, aided by new electrically powered tools. Preassembled parts and appliances were provided by wholly owned subsidiaries, and the company used nonunion labor, making up for rainy days on weekends. At the height of production, thirty houses went up a day.

When complete, Levittown consisted of over seventeen thousand houses and eighty-two thousand residents, making it the largest housing development ever built in the United States. The Cape Cod–style homes, which were built in a few standard variations, typically offered about 750 square feet of space and were sold for as low as $6,990, including a washing machine. As little as 10 percent was all that was necessary for a down payment, and because the mortgage, interest, principal, and taxes were often less than rent, virtually all were owner-occupied—particularly since government aid in the form of VA and FHA guarantees allowed the Levitts both the capital to build the houses and freedom from risk in lending it. In the coming years, they would build similar developments in Pennsylvania and New Jersey—and, more important, these would be followed by a wave of similar developments across the country.

Jefferson would have been disappointed: the United States never became a nation of yeoman farmers. And yet, in important ways, the surburbanization of the United States realized a Jeffersonian vision of small stakeholders. It realized some of the less attractive dimensions of that vision as well: a wish that black Americans and other minorities would simply disappear. The explicit government policy of redlining certain towns, cities, and neighborhoods with high minority populations—declaring them too risky to insure—made them virtually worthless to banks and buyers. Nor could minority families escape such places, for reasons that included individual irresponsibility, government neglect, and the self-fulfilling prophecies of mass abandonment. Levitt himself refused to sell to African Americans for fear that it would hurt his business. In this regard, of course, both he and the government simply reflected the attitudes of the voters and customers they served. "We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem," Levitt explained in the isn't-it-obvious, commonsense logic of the early postwar years. "But we cannot combine the two." In 1960 not a single resident of Levittown was black.

That would change, very gradually, as many of those with African and other minority backgrounds made their fitful entrance into realms of American life from which they had formerly been excluded. To begin to understand why they may have done so—and to begin to understand the cost they and others paid for doing so—one must shift the tenor of the discussion away from the more external, structural elements in the American Dream of Home Ownership into a more psychological and symbolic realm. Only then can one begin to understand what kind of people this modern-day Dream of Home Ownership produced.

Eden is that old-fashioned house
We dwell in every day
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away.

—undated poem by Emily Dickinson (1830–86)

That attempt to understand began early. Among the first people to explore the cultural ramifications of the emerging suburban order was David Riesman, a sociologist whose widely read 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd* traced what he considered a historic shift from the goal-oriented, work-minded, "inner-directed" individual to a more self-conscious, consumer-minded, "outer-directed" one. Riesman did not focus on

postwar surburbanization, which was barely getting under way, and he carefully noted the implicit problems with inner-direction as well as outer-direction (the typical neurosis for the former is shame and guilt, while the latter is subject to a more free-floating sense of anxiety). But many of the elements Riesman and his colleagues noted in *The Lonely Crowd* would resurface in later studies as highly characteristic of the suburban personality.

Perhaps the best known of such works was William Whyte's 1956 study *The Organization Man.* Whyte, who specifically linked the archetypal figure of the title to Riesman's other-directed person, noted the high degree of social conformity that characterized postwar suburban life—in the offices of men who commuted to the city as well as in the communities they returned to each night. (He used the affluent Chicago suburb of Forest Park as his case study.) For Whyte, as for Riesman, this emphasis on "togetherness" imperiled the sense of independence and autonomy that had characterized much of earlier American culture, replacing it with a sense of conformity that was at best bland and at worst deeply hostile to pluralist traditions of democracy. As Whyte recognized, this critique was similar to the one Tocqueville had made a century before. But now, he felt, those most invested in the sense of individualism that once made the United States distinctive had lost the lineaments of the Protestant ethic that once animated the society. Even as these people heartily insisted "that there are some people left—e.g. businessmen—to defend the American Dream," they were succumbing to the blandishments of an organization man who lacked the spine to keep the American Dream alive.

The work of people like Riesman and Whyte received a fair amount of attention in the 1950s, in large measure because one did not have to look very hard to find evidence of what they were talking about. As one suburbanite explained, "If you have any brains, you keep them in your back pocket around here." Added another, "In the city I knew a lot of intellectual, progressive-type people. I'll admit they are more stimulating, full of ideas, always wanting to talk about India or something. But I like the stodgy kind now. It's more comfortable." Stodginess, however, coexisted with yearnings for alternatives that ranged from pathetic to pathological. Such yearnings could be glimpsed in sources like Alfred Kinsey's celebrated 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (his report on females followed five years later) but more commonly in fiction with titles like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and "The Secret Life