

I once had an irrational crush on a girl who told me she spent her summers teaching sailing in Annapolis, MD. Because of that unreachable girl, and all she represented, every time I even saw the word “Annapolis” in print it actually made my eyes widen and my blood race. In a strangely similar manner, when I pass Exit 135 (Westfield, Clark) on the Garden State Parkway, my senses seem to suddenly arise from their customary fog. I lived in Westfield for the first 32 years of my life. I don’t even feel that particularly nostalgic about my time there—but it remains, to borrow Oliver Sacks’ phrase “the landscape of his dreams.” It must be the same for all of us: we’re haunted by certain sidewalks, certain porches, certain willow trees. I’ve now lived longer in Metuchen—but Westfield remains the setting for all my stories, all my nightmares, all the images and sensations of growing up.

Just last month, I was getting an ottoman reupholstered at Maxwell’s Furniture Restoration in Mountainside, and so I found myself, once again, emerging from the Parkway on Exit 135—where the Howard Johnson’s motor lodge and restaurant used to stand, with its steep orange roof. (Now it’s a Shop-Rite.) The Dairy Queen in Clark, the first I’d ever seen, is now an Exxon station.

I drive up Central Avenue towards Westfield. If I turned right, I’d head towards my old friend Michael Krupnick’s house. His father, Jerry Krupnick, was the entertainment editor for the Sunday *Star-Ledger*. Jerry got Michael and me part-time jobs proofreading the Sunday edition every Friday night and Saturday afternoon for the four years I went to Rutgers. To amuse ourselves Michael and I would make tiny “corrections” in the television listings—so that *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla*, identified in the listing as “This may be one of the worst movies ever made” became, inexplicably, “This may be one of the best movies ever made” by the time 600,000 copies were printed on Saturday night.

I turn left off Central to pass Jefferson Elementary School where I attended from kindergarten to second grade—and despite my efforts to concentrate on the road, I am nearly overcome with memories: I see myself dressed in a sailor’s suit, with an empty can of spinach hanging from my neck by a piece of white yarn, as I walked to school for Halloween dressed as Popeye. Earlier that year, I’d fallen on the sidewalk outside the school, lost consciousness, and a teacher had covered me with an army blanket on the sidewalk where my hysterical mother found me—and assumed I was dead.

A group of us walked to Jefferson School (unescorted!) from my childhood house on Norwood Drive. I remember on those walks earnestly debating whether Santa Claus actually existed. (I wasn’t convinced there was a definitive answer.) Here’s where my old dentist lived. Here’s where Judy lived, another irrational crush of mine—the first of many. I would meet Judy thirty years later at a high school reunion—she was a single mother with two children—and some lunatic part of me wondered if I should marry her and take care of her children—the long-delayed fulfillment, I supposed, of my first-grade fantasy. (Thankfully, I resisted.)

And here’s Norwood Drive, truly the landscape of my dreams, but now unrecognizable. The modest development cottages with their tiny garages have been replaced by ill-fitting mansions. Without seeing the number on the post (628) I am unable to recognize my old house—but I long to go inside and see if anything (a switch plate, an electrical socket, a thermostat) remains from the 32 years I lived there. Does the cellar smell the same? Do the steep green-painted stairs (no handrail!) still lead dangerously down to the basement with its speckled linoleum floor and its knotty pine paneling? Is there still a black-and-white television built into a hole in the wall? Is the abrasively upholstered red couch still there? One lonely summer I hand-wrote an entire novel (*Alex Icicle: A Romance in Ten Torrid Chapters*) in a single week on that couch just to see if I could do it.

I drive through downtown to reach the furniture store, and I’m unable to turn any corner without the ghosts physically pressing in on me. Here’s where my friends and I shot a Super 8 movie from a moving car. At the corner of Elm and Quimby was Martin Jewelers where I worked Monday, Wednesday, and Friday after school—engraving 12-25-72 on silver charms and pewter mugs in the basement while an old AM radio played “American Pie.” On Saturday afternoons at noon my high school girlfriend Vicki would arrive at the jewelry store, in her hand-woven blue shawl, and we’d walk together around the corner to The Jolly Trolley for hamburgers. When we’d leave I’d tell her I’d see her that night. Her response was always the same: “Come early and stay late.”

Ah, Vicki! Ah, youth! Ah, Exit 135!