

We are Talking

We are talking now of late summer evenings in Edgartown on the island of Martha's Vineyard, just before the Autumnal Equinox and after the summer folks have left. Silva Lane is a plain, almost ordinary- kind of street, straight and flat and leading only to Debby and Will's house at the end. Most of the houses are of natural shingles, small and squat, or two-story, like mine, built over 70 years ago and softened by hedges or cherry trees. Yards drift into one another, even when there's a shaky old fence or a tall privet; we share the same bittersweet that dances blithely between yards, defying yearly clippings and death threats. We've all known each other a good long number of years, now-for the Vineyard, that is

But it is of these evenings, I speak.

Evenings began after the beach, of course, and that moment differed in each house, depending on whether or not there were children. A symphony of sounds- well-established since dawn- would rise to its apogee around 4 P.M., bees and birds feeding themselves silly before dark and passersby (two streets away) streaming down main street for that last ice cream cone before dinner.

It is not of street or animal sounds that I want to speak now, it is of a contemporaneous atmosphere that had more to do with neighborhood. First, there were the bells chimed on each hour from the Whaling Church. For myself, I'm always amazed that I slept through them all night, yet heard them distinctly in my bed, seconds after awakening. Bells, you say. Then there were the late afternoon chimes from St. Andrews on Winter Street that formed a counterpoint with the Church Street tones. They wafted down the street, bumped into a Japanese Maple, backlit from behind, as sun streamed from behind the Ware's handsome home, washing the small road with a golden flood. Meanwhile, I'd be padding back and forth across my law, moving the sprinkler whose streams sparkled and drew black grackles from just about everywhere to peck through

the velvety green and compete with the loud chirps of "Big Red", the cardinal that each family claimed as its own.

A purring car sound, crunch of rubber on stone. June's back from the beach. Car doors slam. I look over in time to see the gate of the outdoor shower closing. Meanwhile, one beach towel after another gets hung, crows caw, and yet another car lumbers down the street. More doors slam; voices of adolescents- teasing, protesting, laughing- filter into my yard just as the crickets strike up their chorus against the full-throated screech of a few stray seagulls overhead. Six bells toll.

The folks in the big new house on the next road are having friends for dinner again, and a woody smell of bar-b-q collides with the sugary odor of butterfly bush as I move the sprinkler close to the last cones of purple, careful to dodge voracious bumblebees lodged deep in the flowers. A lawnmower groans itself awake and roars into action somewhere. I rest a bit now, sit out back with my garden Buddha and the occasional ripple of wind chimes for company. The sun lowers. A slight chill wraps itself around me. I hear my name called. Alexis appears from her yard, hair still wet. She hands me a home-made journal she's created from recycled paper and bound with a flattened tea carton. She leaves for her senior year at college tomorrow and has written,

Thank you for being a wonderful neighbor. I'm so lucky to have you as a friend.

She included an Eavan Boland poem,

*Setting out for a neighbor's house
in a denim skirt,
a blouse blended in
by the last light,
I am definite to start with
but the light is lessening,
the hedge losing its detail,
the path its edge.*

*Look at me, says the tree.
I was a woman once like you,
full-skirted, human.*

*Suddenly I am not certain
of the way I came
or the way I will return,
only that something
which may be nothing
more than darkness has begun
softening the definitions
of my body, leaving*

*the fears and all the terrors
of the flesh shifting the airs
and form of the autumn quiet
crying "remember us."*

We sat silently in the gathering dusk, let the cocktail party- soccer game- dog bark- eight bells-crow caw sounds bump into each other and float into the night sky.

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