

# Where the Neighborhood Ends

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At the first ring, Lane sprang from his desk. “That’s mine,” he called into the dining room where his parents were drinking their after-dinner coffee. Dropping to the arm of the davenport, he picked up the telephone. “Hello?”

“Hello,” replied a male voice. “This is a concerned citizen. You’re one of the quality families on our block, and I’m calling to warn you. The slum people are standing on the borders of our neighborhood, ready to invade us. Crime is rising. Trash is piling up in the alleys. Beware! Negroes are coming to Hyde Park!”

“You too late, man. Them Negroes already here,” Lane drawled. The caller gasped. Lane let the receiver rattle into the cradle and turned to find his mother standing in the doorway, frowning at him.

“Who was that?” she asked. “One of your friends? One of your father’s clients?”

“Easy, Mama. It was just someone trying to scare us with threats of a ‘Negro invasion.’ Probably a realtor hoping to convince you and Daddy to sell the house cheap so he can resell it at a big profit. That particular wheeler-dealer didn’t do his homework, or he’d have known this house already belongs to a Negro family.”

“Blockbusters have targeted this section of Hyde Park, so we’re going to get more calls,” Lane’s father added as he entered the room. He swallowed the last mouthful of coffee and handed the empty cup to his wife. “Wonderful meal, Lydia Jane. Sorry I have to run. A group of neighbors and university officials invited me to their meeting tonight. Apparently they want a lawyer’s advice on how to stop the busters.”

Lane grunted. “More likely they want advice on how to stop the ‘invasion.’”

“Very likely,” Henry Cross answered. With a sad grin, he lifted his hat from the hook beside the door and left for the meeting.

As Lane started toward his room, his mother put a hand on his shoulder. “No matter who calls, Lane, you should use proper English. You have to show you have a good education and good manners in order to get respect.”

“Yes ’um.” Lane immediately regretted his cheeky reply. “I mean: yes, Mother Dear.” He gave her a clown’s smile and returned to his psychology homework. He had registered for psychology because he liked the idea of reading another person’s mind. Besides, the fact that only seniors were allowed to take the course gave it a certain mystique. He was a senior this year. In eight months he’d graduate with the class of 1957. That is, he’d graduate if he passed this course. Psychology, he’d discovered, was

not the science of mind reading. Rather, it was the study of people—the effort to understand their perspectives, motives, and actions.

“Man, there are some people I’d really like to figure out,” Lane mumbled to himself as he returned to his textbook. He studied until he heard his father’s key in the front door. Then, turning on the radio, Lane laid out his clothes for the next day. He draped a collared shirt and pressed trousers over a chair, careful to preserve the creases. Next he packed his gym bag. As he slipped his cotton shirt from a clothes hanger and began to fold it, he recalled his mother’s gentle scolding earlier that evening.

Lane sat down in his chair again. He pictured himself in a white lab coat, scribbling notes on a clipboard while listening to his mother talk. She had an obsession with the word *proper*. Proper English. Proper manners. A proper hat

and proper gloves. A proper house and a proper car.

“But why?” Lane imagined asking her.

“Why does being *proper* matter so much to you? And why do you try to make me *proper*, too?”

Suddenly he knew. His mother had given him the answer that very evening: she wanted respect. She wanted their white neighbors to accept her.

A flash of anger jolted Lane from his chair. Good grades and neckties hadn't won him respect or acceptance. In his classmates' eyes, he was just a Negro. “No more ironed gym clothes for me!” he whispered fiercely as he crushed his tee shirt into a ball and tossed it into his bag. Then, on a rebellious impulse, he crammed in an old pair of khaki pants, too.

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The other person Lane would have liked to bring into his imaginary psychologist's office was his classmate Robert. Lane and Robert had known each other since ninth grade. Yet, in all the years of their alleged friendship, Robert had never invited Lane home, never introduced Lane to his family. Robert had dined with Lane's family once or twice, but usually the two young men met at a movie, a park, or a street corner. Lane hadn't thought the situation peculiar until that morning when he was waiting on the school steps for the doors to open.

A petite brunette had come up the sidewalk and stopped in front of him. “Hi! You must be Lane. I'm Robert's sister, Alice.”

“Where's Robert? I mean, pleased to meet you,” Lane blabbered. “You're a freshman, aren't you? Doesn't Robert usually walk with you?”

“Yes. I’m a freshman. Big Brother, my personal bodyguard, escorts me to school but this morning he forgot his civics book and had to run back home for it.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Here he comes now.”

As Lane turned to look, he met stares from the white girls standing on the sidewalk. But then all his attention focused on Robert, who charged toward his sister as though she were trapped in a flaming car.

Robert leaped between Lane and Alice. Taking her by the hand, he pulled his sister to the safety of the group of girls. Then he angrily returned to Lane. “You stay away from Alice,” Robert commanded. “Don’t talk to her.”

“Why not?” Lane asked, perplexed by this unexpected hostility.

“Because,” Robert answered, “Alice is white.”

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The next day was Friday, and after school Robert waited for Lane outside the gym. “Let’s get a milkshake,” Robert invited. They’d always celebrated the end of the week with a double malted at the corner drugstore.

“No thanks, I have plans,” Lane answered, wondering how Robert could continue pretending they were friends. “I promised to play cards with some guys. *Other* guys,” he added before Robert could expand the invitation. “See you around.” Lane strode home. He stashed his books and gym bag, which now contained his school clothes, in his bedroom. He wrote a note for his mother and slipped it under the vase on the dining table on his way to the kitchen. Then, grabbing a bag of roasted peanuts, he took a

cardboard carrier of root beer from the refrigerator. He went back to his desk once again, retrieved a pack of playing cards, and tucked it into the hip pocket of his khaki pants.

Outside, Lane turned his back to the wind blowing off Lake Michigan. As he walked, he surveyed the neighborhoods. Close to the University of Chicago campus, he saw tidy lawns, clean sidewalks, and white faces. Lane's family and one other family were the only blacks living in this section of Hyde Park.

Two blocks farther west, Lane passed a black woman carrying a small child. A few pairs of dark eyes watched him from curtained windows. Most of the young people coming home from school, though, were white. They gave Lane plenty of distance. A freckled man installing a red "For Sale" sign paused to glare at him.

Around the corner, "For Sale" signs lined the street as if they were the newest fad in lawn ornaments. "More of a blight than a fad," Lane thought. "Blockbuster blight."

He knew how the disease spread. First, a real estate agent moved one black family to an all-white block or simply spread a rumor that a black family had arrived. Warning of a "Negro invasion," he urged anxious homeowners to sell quickly before property values plummeted. Then the agent bought dozens of houses at bargain rates and resold them to blacks at exorbitant prices. Banks often denied mortgages to low-income blacks, forcing them to borrow money from predatory lenders. Not surprisingly, many new owners soon lost their homes. Landlords bought the repossessed the houses, converted them into apartments, and crowded them with tenants.

At last Lane reached Cottage Grove Avenue. Five or six years ago, before the blight of greed and racial prejudice struck, this had been a healthy block. Now it lay on the border of the slums. Lane hurried toward the house where his friends Cobie and Esau lived. It had been sliced into apartment units, and all seven members of the twins' family rented the basement. Consequently, Lane was surprised to find a new Lincoln parked along the sidewalk.

As he approached, he heard a threatening voice. A red-bearded stranger wearing a business suit stood on the front porch. "Didn't I tell you never let a city inspector on my property?" he demanded.

A tall, gray-haired woman in the doorway moved her hands as if to protest. Esau, knotting his fists, pressed close behind her. Lane glanced

around for Cobie and spotted him leaning against the corner of the house but watching and alert.

"I don't care about the inspector from City Hall! I don't care what papers he has!" the stranger raged. "Don't let anyone inside this building! Tell the housing inspectors they have to call the landlord. And tell them you don't know who that is!" The man swiveled, bumped down the steps, then swiveled to face the woman again. "Thanks to you, I got an inspection notice. Now I have to repair the plumbing. You'll be getting the bill." He rocked down the sidewalk, squeezed into the Lincoln, and drove away.

When the car disappeared, the woman closed the door and the twins gathered on the front steps. "Hey man!" Lane called as he came up the sidewalk. "Who was that guy?"

"Landlord," Cobie replied. Esau merely nodded. Lane didn't question them further.

Although he'd known the twins for only a short time, he could read fury and frustration in their faces.

The young men headed for an abandoned garage and sat on wooden crates. A fourth crate served as a table. Lane opened bottles of root beer while Esau divided up the peanuts, which substituted for poker chips. Cobie dealt the first hand. Within four games, Lane lost all his peanuts. Esau shared his takings with Lane, and the three friends snapped shells and munched nuts noisily.

"What's your secret, Esau?" Lane asked. "You always win at cards." Esau shrugged.

"He just lucky," Cobie answered.

"I don't know," Lane dropped a hollow shell into his empty bottle. "There has to be a secret—some kind of skill—for playing the cards right. If

you know how, you can make your hand a winner."

"Nah, cards all about luck," Cobie insisted. "You git what you git. Life that way too. We live on Prairie Avenue. City come and wreck our building. That just bad luck. We come here. Soon the city wreck this place, too. More bad luck."

"If the city tears down this block, maybe your mother could apply for an apartment at Prairie Avenue Courts," Lane suggested cautiously, uncertain of the twins' reaction. "My dad says those new public housing units are really great. Shiny kitchens. Big bathrooms. Plenty of bedrooms."

Esau set down his root beer. His jaw muscles tightened, and he glared at Lane. "You ever see it? That place look real fancy but it a warehouse. A warehouse for Negroes. Poor Negroes." He paused, as if startled to hear his

own voice. It must have sounded good to him because he added: “You wanta win? Then don’t trust nobody.”

Later, as Lane walked home, he thought about Cobie’s belief that everything depended on raw, unpredictable luck. Until this afternoon, he had envied Cobie’s carefree outlook on life. But suddenly Lane realized that outlook was actually a kind of surrender. Esau’s resistance, in contrast, commanded Lane’s admiration.

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When Lane arrived home, he headed for the den, hoping for a private talk with his father about the events of the past two days. He knocked twice, swung the door open, and stepped into the room. It was empty. Through the window, Lane heard his parents’ voices; they

were in the backyard, grilling steaks for dinner. As he turned to leave the den, a folder labeled “Slums” caught his eye. He closed the door and sat down at the desk for a closer look.

As a lawyer, Lane’s father often worked for the NAACP on cases involving housing or employment issues. “You can’t win a case unless you do the research,” Henry always said; and he filled file drawers with photographs, legal documents, and whatever evidence he could find to support his clients. Lane guessed the folder lying on the desk was somehow related to the meeting of neighbors and university officials the previous night.

The first document in the folder was a letter from the Auburn Park Property Restriction Association urging a home owner to sign an “Anti-Colored Restriction Agreement.” This agreement prohibited the sale or lease of the

property to Negroes. The only nonwhites allowed to live on the property were servants. Auburn Park lay southwest of Hyde Park, and when Lane looked for a date on the letter, he saw that it had been written in August 1929. Clipped to the letter was a note in his father's handwriting:

“Restrictive covenants outlawed—see U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948).”

“The court can force whites to let Negroes move in,” Lane thought, “but it can't keep racists from moving out.”

Beneath the restriction agreement, Lane found several photographs. Two pictured men examining crumbling buildings. Wallpaper hung down like macabre holiday decorations, exposing brick and bare wood. Lane flipped through more photos: a filthy bathroom, a kitchen without plumbing, a bedroom with the upper half of the

partition walls missing. Everything was dark, stained, and ugly. On the back of each photo, Henry had pasted a label giving a date and address. Most of the photos had been taken near the borders of Hyde Park in 1953. The men examining the buildings were city inspectors, Lane learned. He wondered if the photos were propaganda pictures because all the inspectors were white, but all the residents were black children. Following these photos was an inspection notice. Cobie and Esau's landlord had probably received one just like it.

The last photograph portrayed the demolition of condemned buildings. “And that's how the story ends,” Lane said to himself. “The city tears down the old neighborhood to make way for a new one.” Hearing his parents enter the house, Lane carefully straightened the stack

of photos and documents, slipped them back into the folder, and went into the dining room.

“Henry, would you please repair the backyard gate tomorrow?” Lydia Jane asked her husband during dinner. “Could you take out the gate and fence the opening? I heard there’s a prowler in Hyde Park.”

“You probably heard a rumor started by the blockbusters,” Henry replied, “but I’ll do the job first thing in the morning. In the afternoon, I plan to call on a few local businessmen.” He explained that a community group was proposing a redevelopment plan for sections of Hyde Park. “I agreed to rally support for the plan,” Henry continued, “but I’m also trying to convince the group to add a building or two for low-income residents.”

“Public housing? Here? In Hyde Park?”

Lane’s mother struggled to control the alarm in her voice.

“Public housing is the solution. If the city of Chicago provides enough comfortable, affordable places to live, landlords won’t have any poor tenants to exploit, and the slums will disappear,” Lane’s father reasoned. “We’ll start the cleanup on the southwestern edge of Hyde Park, along Cottage Grove Avenue between 55<sup>th</sup> Street and 56<sup>th</sup> Street.”

Lane’s throat burned; he gulped ice water but his words still smoldered. “Do you realize most of the people living on that block are Negroes? Cobie and Esau just moved there because the city ripped down their building. Where will they go now?”

“You mean Jacob and Esau Faris? The boys you met when I took you along to visit my

client this summer?” Henry looked closely at his son. “Well, now you see why we need public housing. The Faris family is a case in point—a family forced to live in a basement because they can’t afford anything better.”

Lane slowly emptied his glass before he replied. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I can’t agree with you for two reasons. First, some poor black people see public housing as a tactic to keep them fenced in, away from wealthy white folks, where the city can keep an eye on them.”

His father looked thoughtful, then nodded. “I can understand that viewpoint.”

Lane went on, selecting his words carefully. “The second reason I disagree with you is those plans for urban renewal sound to me like plans for Negro removal. Our neighbors claim they’re merely clearing out the slums. Although they’ll never admit it, they’re clearing out blacks.

Racism rules in Hyde Park. Our neighbors don’t truly accept us.”

“Our neighbors do accept us,” Lydia Jane insisted. “We’re respectable! That’s why I worry about inviting poor blacks to Hyde Park. Yes, they deserve a decent place to live, but they represent the Negro stereotype we’re trying to break.”

“Mama, can’t you see?” Lane spoke bitterly, remembering again the scene with Robert and Alice on the school steps. “Proper English, stylish clothes, good manners—they don’t mean a thing. In our neighbors’ eyes, we’re just Negroes.” Lane turned back to his father. “And I bet they’re preparing to throw us out of their high-class, white neighborhood.” Lane laid his napkin on the table. “Excuse me, I have homework.”

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On Saturday night, Lane said goodbye to Cobie and Esau outside the movie theater and started for home alone. A chill wind rattled along the buster-blighted street. Lane shivered; his slouchy hat and khaki pants weren't heavy enough for this weather. He walked faster until he reached the block where, the previous day, he had passed the group of teenagers and the man installing a "For Sale" sign. He remembered the glares of white residents on this street. Negroes clearly weren't welcome here.

Suddenly, from one of houses, someone yelled: "There's the prowler! Get him!"

Lane looked around, wondering where the prowler was, until a glass bottle shattered on the sidewalk only three feet away. Then he

understood—someone was calling him the prowler!

"Come on! Get him!" a cry rang out.

Lane broke into a sprint. News photos of the Cicero Race Riot with the National Guard holding back a mob of homeowners protesting the arrival of blacks flashed through his mind as he ran. The sound of pounding feet and shouting pursued him.

"Black boy! Go home!"

His pursuers were gaining on him, but now Lane was only two blocks from his own backyard. He accelerated. At last he saw the light in the kitchen window. In another two hundred yards, he would reach the gate and be home free.

Too late, he remembered that the gate was gone—there was only a solid fence. As he swerved toward the street again, his feet rolled

over fallen walnuts, and he crashed to the ground.

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