

The Other Town

By Steven Millhauser

The other town, the one that exactly resembles our town, lies just beyond the north woods. To get there, we have only to walk through a stretch of shade, over a spongy layer of pine needles and brown-black leaves, and come out in any of the backyards that border the woods—the DeAngelo yard, say, with its flowered beach towels hanging over the back-porch rail and its coil of green hose next to the dented garbage cans, or the Altschuler yard with its tall sugar maple, its yellow Wiffle ball bat lying half in sun and half in shade, and its aluminum chaise longue with strips of orange and white vinyl on which a blue eyeglass case is resting, or the Langley yard with its grass-stained soccer ball, its red-handled jump rope, its tin pie-dish for home plate, and its bags of peat moss and fertilizer leaning up against the side of the detached garage. Those of us who prefer not to go on foot can drive up North Pine or Holbrook, both of which end at Linwood, the street that runs along the front of the houses whose backyards border the woods. From there we can go in any direction, all over the town. If we're in the mood, we can stop wherever we like, walk up to any house, open the front door. We can step inside and explore every room. Later, if we wish, we can drive through the other town's north woods, up the other North Pine or Holbrook. Then we'll come out at the edge of a town that is different from ours, a town with its own style—as if, all along, our trip through the other town had been nothing but a trip through our town, which of course in some sense it always is.

Although we're drawn to the other town because of its startling resemblance to ours—the morning papers lying at the same angles on the same porches, the doors and drawers opened to the identical distances, the same dishes in the dish racks and the same clothes in the laundry baskets—it's also true that we're struck by certain differences. We can hardly fail to notice the separate groups of people, often our own neighbors, crossing lawns, entering and leaving houses, stopping now and then to look about, like tourists visiting a famous spot. Then there

are the town guards, in their dark green shirts with yellow armbands, who are visible everywhere—in every house and store, in the two parks, in the high school, in the picnic grounds by the stream before the woods. Here and there we also catch glimpses of the replicators, the ones who see to it that all changes in our town are repeated in the other town, and who do their best to keep out of our way. In addition, there's a sense we all have, an elusive but still quite definite sense, which might be called an intuition of absence: the absence of people living in homes, working in stores, conducting the daily life of a town. For of course no one lives in the other town, which exists solely to be visited by us.

Apart from these large differences, which none of us can help noticing, there are many small discrepancies, usually detectable in one's own duplicated house, as when the crowded kitchen drawer contains the very can opener missing from the drawer in one's own kitchen, or when the tomato plant, tied to a stick with string at the side of the house, bears a tomato of different size, on a different stem. Those of us who are older, and have visited the other town many times, take a special pleasure in detecting such mismatchings, though a few purists among us argue that any difference is a flaw and should never be tolerated.

The origin of the other town remains obscure. Its first appearance in the historical record occurs in 1685, some forty years after the founding of our town, when the building of a new house "and of the same house in the North Towne" is reported, though the mention is so brief and riddling that it has been subject to conflicting interpretations. One town historian has argued that "the same house" refers not to an identical house but to a house in similar style. Another points out that "the North Towne" is itself an expression of uncertain meaning, since it was sometimes used to indicate the northern part of our own town. Not till the middle of the eighteenth century does it become clear that a second town exists to our north, imitating our town and maintained by our residents; in addition to public records, private diaries report visits to the other town, which one citizen calls a "wonder work." Still, many details of reproduction and maintenance

remain unclear, and it isn't until the nineteenth century that a full record begins to emerge, including the founding of an early version of town guards and the establishment, in 1882, of the craft of replicators. Such evidence as we have suggests only that the other town arose not long after ours and was in some sense a copy. Even this broad proposition has its dissenters, for some argue that the other town was at first distinct from ours and only gradually took on the quality of imitation.

However that may be, the record for well over one hundred years indicates an increasing concern for meticulous replication. Indeed, there's good reason to think that in earlier years the level of imitation was far less precise than it has since become. Before the establishment of replicators, the business of duplication was carried out by separate groups of craftsmen hired at need by the town council. Since the workers had other business, delay was frequent and the entire system subject to a high degree of disorganization. The importance of the replicators lay above all in their being full-time employees engaged in a single undertaking. But whereas the original replicators were expected to attend mostly to houses and their furnishings, our present-day replicators are responsible for all elements of decor, from the paving of streets and the renovation of public buildings to the daily adjustment of levels of salt in the saltshakers and the arrangement of forks in the silverware drawers. Groups of "watchers," working in our town, report on their laptops all daily changes, which the replicators in turn bring about in the other town. During prime visiting hours, from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., the replicators bring adjustments up to date every two hours, so that, for example, a package delivered to a front porch in our town will also appear on the front porch of the identical house in the other town; because of the difference in time, it's possible for someone who receives a package in our town to drive to the other town and await the same package, which always arrives, though later; such discrepancies seem inevitable, although the replicators have reduced the time lag significantly during the last decade and foresee an era of temporal simultaneity.

Recently the art of replication has reached new levels

of mastery. Replicators can reproduce the precise grain of a weathered shingle, the pattern of mud spray on the side of a car, the faint discoloration on the rim of an old coffee cup, the design of cracks on a glued-together porcelain rooster on the kitchen windowsill. A more difficult challenge lies in the realm of Nature. The arrangement of twigs and branches on a specific sycamore, the exact position of blossoms on a flowering rhododendron, the structure of petals in a particular white rose, all present challenges of design, patterns of apparent randomness within a complex order, which have taxed the skills of master craftsmen. Only two generations ago, replicators did little more than select real plants, restricting their attention to size, shape, and number: a medium-sized wild cherry for the side yard, three azaleas and a well-trimmed snowball bush under the front windows. But complaints about discrepancies led to a decade of radical artifice. Suddenly every Norway maple with its precise system of leaves and branches, every spirea bush and marigold, was replicated in the master workshops and planted in the yards of the other town. This in turn led to a new outburst of complaints, since the artificial plants and trees, though convincing at first, gradually gave off an air of falsity. We're now in the midst of a more satisfactory experiment, in which the real and the replicated are carefully intermingled: among the branches of the actual shagbark hickory a few artificial branches; among the real leaves, the cunning leaves of a master replicator.

Although most of us simply enjoy visiting the other town without thinking very much about it, there are those who can't help wondering why it is there at all. Some say the other town serves as a welcome distraction from the cares of our own town—for them it's a kind of superior amusement park, where we can forget our worries and take delight in a world of sensations. If a window is broken in our town, we rush to have it fixed, we can't rest until the damage is repaired. But in the other town we note with pleasure the skill with which the pattern of broken glass has been imitated, we point admiringly at the shards of glass lying on the living room rug.

Such arguments, others claim, are suitable only for children. The real value of the town, in their opinion, lies

in the way it permits us to see our own town more clearly or completely. Preoccupied as we are with domestic and financial cares, we pass through our lives noticing so little of what's really around us that we might be said to inhabit an invisible town; in the other town, the visible town, our attention is seized, we feel compelled to look at things closely, to linger over details that would otherwise fail to exist at all. In this way the other town leads us to a fuller or truer grasp of things. Far from being a childish diversion intended to distract us from more serious concerns, it's a necessary stage away from the simplicities of childhood and into the richness of adult understanding.

For my part, I think there is some truth to both these theories, but I believe the other town serves another purpose as well. Although it strives to resemble our town precisely, in fact it offers us freedoms unthinkable at home. There, we can penetrate other houses at will, cross forbidden boundaries, climb unfamiliar stairways, enter secret rooms. All that is closed to us, in our town, is open there, all that's hidden is seen. This shattering of constriction, this sensation of expansion, of exhilarating release, is in my view the real purpose of the other town, which for all its stillness invites us into a world of dangerous and criminal pleasures.

Our urge to explain the other town, to justify its existence, is not without practical import. The other town is maintained by our workers and paid for by our taxes. Voices are regularly raised in opposition to the whole foolish enterprise, despite the sense shared by most of us that life without the other town would be unsatisfactory, in some way difficult to explain. Repeatedly we hear that the other town is simply unnecessary. We already have a town, the argument goes—a second one, exactly resembling it, is entirely superfluous, not to say absurd, all the more so because no one lives there and no use is made of it, apart from visits that draw people away from more profitable pursuits. This objection shades quickly into a purely material one: the other town represents a shocking waste of land and money. The material argument generally includes proposals to make the existing houses available for sale, to build new homes and low-rise apartments, to develop a senior-citizen center—in short, to make use

of the other town in ways that would benefit everyone.

Such ideas are vigorously supported by a small but aggressive group who attack the other town on moral grounds, arguing that the so-called pleasures it offers are disgusting and corrupt. What after all can be said in favor of the pleasure of spying on the lives of one's neighbors, of violating private property, of undermining the laws of our town? These moralists object in particular to the invasion of homes, above all their own homes, especially late at night, when visitors are allowed to explore any unlit room with flashlights supplied by guards. The visitors—we ourselves—are accused of having an unhealthy interest in secret and sexual matters, in hidden things of every description, and in truth we've become quite good at finding and interpreting signs: the black half-slip and the twisted jeans on the throw rug by the rumpled bed, the burst of red wine on the kitchen wall.

But the moralists don't stop here. They go on to accuse the other town of encouraging indecent behavior in our children. A recent incident has inflamed their anger. A band of six children, ranging in age from nine to twelve, was caught roaming through a house on Warren Street, in our town, when the owners were away. A valuable table had been damaged by knife cuts, a bedroom wall defaced with an image of male genitalia scrawled in ink. Those who defend the other town against charges of corrupting our children argue that incidents of this kind are quite rare, that parents themselves are to blame for failing to enforce the distinction between our town and the other town, that in any case childhood disobedience won't vanish if the other town is abolished. In my view, all such defenses are a mistake, since their very existence lends legitimacy to the objections they seek to remove. Far better to listen with melancholy patience, nodding slowly now and then, with a slight narrowing of the eyes, as if smoke is drifting against your face.

In addition to those who attack the other town in every possible way, there are those who support the idea of a second town but object to what they consider a grotesque obsession with replication. It's precisely the differences, they insist, that make the other town worth visiting. Some go so far as to say that the differences are

too subtle and ought to be increased and exaggerated. They propose fantastical dwellings, streets of alabaster and gold, underground dream-parks, unearthly towers. Others claim that the existing discrepancies are already so vivid and abundant that larger departures would seem childish and crude.

In spite of these noisy quarrels and harsh attacks, which have plagued us during our entire history, one thing remains certain: the other town is there. Tirelessly it exercises its powers of attraction even on those who protest against it, and perhaps especially on them. Scarcely a week passes when we don't make our way, by foot or by car, through the north woods and into the other town, a town so exactly like our own that for a moment a confusion comes over us, before we remember where we are. Then we wander across backyards, noting details that might have escaped our attention, walk along streets that are just like our streets, except for certain differences, check to see whether the new stop sign has gone up, enter a neighbor's house to explore a rumor of adultery—the necktie over the clock radio, the blue bra draped over the cordovan loafer—or observe the work of a replicator rearranging chairs, opening a door, placing a cup in the sink.

Sometimes the tug of our daily lives prevents us from visiting the other town as often as we might like. Then a restlessness comes over us, an unease, a kind of physiological unhappiness. We stop whatever we're doing—mowing the lawn, lifting the groceries from the trunk of the car—and listen. For it's as if the other town, which is far quieter than ours, is producing a hum, a melody, that we strain to hear. Then we know the time is coming when, in sudden obedience to an inner command, we'll look around quickly, check our watches, and leave for a visit.

So powerful, in fact, is the pull of the other town that some citizens arrange their lives so as to spend as much time there as possible. These fanatics enter every attic and cellar, examine every tree and bush, taking scrupulous note of discrepancies and successful simulations. Once they return home they always turn their talk to the other town, or else sit restlessly alone, as if waiting for something, so that it might be said of them that their real existence is over there, beyond the north woods, while our

town, rising up before their eyes, must seem to them a vision or dream.

It even happens now and then that someone will try to take up residence in the other town—an act forbidden by law. Teenagers, in particular, attempt to hide there after closing time at midnight, though only last year a husband and wife, both in their forties, were discovered by a guard at three in the morning in the bedroom of a house on Sagamore Road. Repeated violations are punished by penalties of enforced absence, which are considered so harsh that they are usually commuted to community service. One group of teenage girls, who call themselves *The River*, hid in the other woods repeatedly and were finally forbidden to enter the other town for a year. They seemed chastened, performed odd jobs around town, and met quietly at one another's houses, where they sat on front porches on hot summer evenings listening to the radio, tapping cigarette ash into the air, and pressing against their collarbones cool bottles of soda glittering with droplets of condensation. One night seven of them were arrested in the dark living room of the Lorenzo house in the other town. As it turned out, they had patiently dug a tunnel, night after night, from the north woods into the forbidden world, where they held secret meetings for weeks before being discovered by a guard.

We who are not fanatics, we common citizens who take life as it comes—we're content to know that the other town is always there, awaiting our visit. Indeed we prefer things this way and feel no desire to cross over permanently. For what would be the point of that? Our lives are here, in our town. It's here that we work, marry, raise our children, and die. The other town is by nature the town that's other—if we moved there, it would at that moment cease to be what it is. For we understand in our bones, without worrying it into thought, that the attraction of the other town lies precisely in its being over there. And we understand something else, though less clearly. The other town, when we enter it, suddenly casts over our town a thereness, an otherness, which we find pleasing, if a little confusing. It's almost as if we can't feel our town, cannot know about it, until we're there, in the other town, imagining our town on the other side of the woods. So

perhaps it's true, after all, that when we visit the other town we aren't escaping from our town, as some say, but entering it at last.

But these are difficult questions, which we're content to leave to those who are gifted in thinking about such things. For our part, it's enough to know that each town is there, offering itself to us in its own way. For our town, too, invites our attention, though sometimes we're aware of it only when we enter the other town. In this sense it might be said that our town requires the other, much as the other town depends on ours. Or perhaps the two towns together form a separate town, a third town, and it's in this third town that we truly live.

But again I feel like someone who has managed to wander off into the shade of high trees, up there in the woods. Far better to stick to the path, in my opinion. For there, on one of the trails between the two towns, you can decide to come out in either direction: into a sudden backyard, where every blade of grass and drooping dandelion shows itself like a flame, where a bright blue watering can stands before the half-painted lattices at the base of an old back porch, through which protrude pricker branches and a cluster of sun-struck leaves—or, in the other direction, into the picnic area on our side of the woods, with its brown stream, its swings on long chains, and its unpainted wooden tables, on one of which a pinecone as long as a cigar lies beside a brilliant red paper cup. Though both directions have something to be said for them, there's also a third way, which is the one I like best. That's when you can stop for a moment, midway along the path, and turn your head in both directions: toward the other town, which shimmers through the thick branches of oak and pine, and toward our town, almost obscured by the woods hut still showing through. Exactly where I am, when I stand there and look both ways, who can say? It's just for a little while, before I move on.