

A Suburb without a City

by Marilyn Carr

The impeccably planned town of Deep River, Ontario, created for the employees of the newly minted Chalk River Nuclear Laboratories, was designed by a guy with the unfortunate name of John Bland in 1944. Mr. Bland sat down with his No. 2 graphite pencil and set to work creating our terrarium. He sketched a crescent here, a winding trail there, and every so often punctuated it with cul-de-sacs. The first commandment of suburban planning is to have a few straight roads to funnel the through-traffic in and out, then hang them with a necklace of narrow streets like tributaries of the Amazon, bending every way it is possible to bend, to keep local traffic local. This may work well in an actual suburb where there is such a thing as through traffic. In our case, traffic is not traffic unless it is local. Even after they did away with the guardhouse, anyone accidentally venturing off Highway 17, north of Algonquin Park, into town is spotted and dealt with within one block by several keen eyes wondering why there is a strange car on Deep River Road.

The original houses that populated Mr. Bland's avenues and cul-de-sacs were rounded up and transported in their entirety from various army bases that didn't need them after the war. I imagine a house-wrangler herding them onto the backs of trucks then setting off in a convoy of Monopoly pieces, the houses apprehensively waiting to find out whether they will land on Boardwalk or be stuck on Baltic Avenue.

The war-time fours and sixes were plopped down fully formed. An instant town. A “four” has four rooms including the kitchen. A “six” has six rooms with the addition of two slanted-ceiling bedrooms on the second floor and an encroachment of real estate on the main floor courtesy of the stairs. The fours and sixes huddle around the middle of town like settlers circling the wagons. As Mr. Bland’s streets, roads, and avenues flow outward, the domestic architecture branches out as well. There are square, two-story singles and semis clad in grey asbestos siding, bungalows on concrete pads, and the exotic mid-century modern “brown houses” with vaulted ceilings, which back onto the “wood paths,” winding walkways from nowhere to nowhere. The streets are named after both halves of our existence: scientists and trees. Darwin, Newton, Rutherford, Fermi, and Kelvin. Birch, maple, spruce, alder, and poplar. There’s a constant reminder of the world we inhabit, most certainly all part of Mr. Bland’s grand scheme if not his grand plot.

Our town is planned within an inch of its life. There’s nothing for anyone to decide. On my side of town, no blue bungalow is ever beside another blue bungalow. The green houses are beside the yellow houses. And if you draw the short straw, you get a pink house. You have to make sure to remember the colour of your house, otherwise you might barge in and sit down to someone else’s dinner.

The shopping district in the centre forms a town quadrilateral rather than a town square, a daringly rakish sweep of the pencil by Mr. Bland. The shopping options are actually not all that shameful: banks, grocery stores, boutiques, and a miniature Eaton’s department store with everything from high fashion to fine china to lawnmowers. No need to ever leave even if there was somewhere else to go. The checkout clerk at the grocery store (who probably lives next door) reminds you to buy the birthday candles and extra milk for the party. The proprietor of the

clothing store sells you the skirt that goes with the sweater you bought last week. The same sweater everyone else has, in blue, pink, or green. The steam plant whistle blows every day at 4:30 to remind us it's 4:30. The rhythm of the day and week never changes. Everything goes according to plan.

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Thanks to Mr. Bland, it is impossible to get from A to B without detouring through G, M, and W. However, he did make sure to scatter parks, wild spots, and schools throughout the town so you don't need to bother going outside of your own neighbourhood for recreation or education. So we don't. The shopping centre is an invisible force field that stops my local cohort dead in its tracks. Until we are thrown together in grade 7, kids from the east side rarely intersect with kids from the west side. I have no idea what goes on past the middle of town but that doesn't bother me. My flat earth is complete as it is. No need to mess with dragons yet.

On my side of town, everyone's parents seem to know who I belong to even if I have never heard of them. I am sauntering home from downtown with a new *Archie* comic when someone's mother slows her woody station wagon, rolls down the window and asks me if I want a ride home. "I don't know who you are," I say, being well schooled in the requisite rules of stranger danger that are less useful to me in this town than learning how to calculate pi to the fifteenth decimal using a slide rule.

"Don't worry Susie, I know your mother and who you are," she replies. Except for the Susie part, this seems like a reasonable response. But I'm in a hurry to get home to crack open the *Archie* and find out whether Veronica is on the ins or outs, so I hop in the car. She revs up the engine and drives around and about the snakes-and-ladders streets before dropping me off outside a beige bungalow that's nowhere near my blue one. I still don't know who she was or

who she thought I was. But any brush with pseudo-anonymity, however fleeting, is to be savoured. Like a good Jughead storyline.

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