CHAPTER 10

Critiques of Postwar Suburbia

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of postwar suburbs touched off a heated national debate in the 1950s and 1960s over one basic question: were suburbs good or bad for America? This public discussion attracted numerous participants—journalists, academics, novelists, artists, filmmakers, advertisers, and real estate developers—whose opinions swung between the two extremes of utopia and dystopia. Suburbia.was imagined as either the happy realization of the American dream or a cesspool for every American neurosis and social pathology. By the 1960s, a group of sociologists sought to test these hyperbolic assertions by exploring life on the ground in suburbia. Despite their efforts, the extremist rhetoric captured the public imagination, influencing public understand of suburbia even to our own day.

To its boosters, suburbia was the very embodiment of the middle-class American dream. These advocates included an array of interests who shared a stake in selling suburban homes and the goods to fill them—developer-builders, mortgage lenders, real estate agents, television networks, women's magazines, and advertisers. In their portrayals, suburbia was a warm idyllic place. Families lived the dream of upward mobility in an economically robust America, enjoying the good life replete with all the latest gadgets. This imagery appeared in advertisements for property and household products—such as those depicted in chapter 9—as well as 1950s and 1960s television sitcoms like *Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver,* and *Father Knows Best.* These similarities were no accident. Advertisers recognized suburbia as a vast and lucrative market. The average suburban family was 70 percent richer than the national average and it was poised to make major purchases. Television, in turn, was highly dependent on advertising revenues. It thus made economic sense for both TV programs and their sponsors to celebrate and even romanticize the suburban lifestyle.

By the mid-1950s, a much darker view of suburban life began to emerge. According to the critics—including academics, novelists, filmmakers, and designer-planners, among others—the mass-produced landscape of suburbia was a breeding ground for the most troubling social trends of the era: conformity, materialism, a blind embrace of corporate culture, excessive mobility, and female oppression. Critics chastised suburbia for promoting the trivialization of life. In their view, homogeneous neighborhoods sheltered suburbanites from the diverse experiences and needs of the broader population, while an overemphasis on family life and pocketbook politics destroyed a sense of civic obligation. Even kids—the presumed beneficiaries of suburbanization—suffered. They were portrayed variously as coddled, infantilized by overbearing mothers, cut off from "the real world," or headed for juvenile delinquency.It is worth noting the contradictions among some of these critiques. Scholars such as Lewis Mumford and the urban critic Jane Jacobs emphasized suburbia's social isolation, its tendency to cut people off from one another. Others, like William Whyte, drew a portrait of restless socializing and nosy neighbors. The one common denominator among them was a belief that suburbia was somehow responsible for these problems. In some cases, this attack was an indirect defense of a more pastoral and exclusive suburbia, where tasteful landscaping emphasized the union of family and nature, safely distant from factory workers and urban

ethnics. Even for those who had once seen suburbanization as the salvation of the city, the reality of mass suburbia was a shock. Planning proponents who had envisioned a ring of cooperative garden cities saw instead hungry capitalism and state-sponsored sprawl. Whatever their perspective, the landscape became a disturbing symbol for the society that inhabited it. Stirred by this critique, a handful of planner-developers initiated a short-lived movement for New Towns in the 1960s and early 1970s, most notably in Reston, Virginia, Columbia, Maryland, and Irvine, California. Their aim was to counter the purportedly lifeless and irrational development of most suburbs with comprehensively planned suburban cities, designed to reinvigorate civic engagement and community life.

Strikingly enough, in this broad body of criticism, the white middle-class suburbanite emerged as a kind of victim, a casualty of mass society and corporate greed. This assessment took its cue from other cultural criticism of the 1950s, which lambasted mass culture as a source of manipulation and oppression. At the same time, suburban critics were curiously silent on the most pressing domestic conflict of the decade—the civil rights campaign to overturn the color barrier in the suburban north and Jim Crow south. Acknowledging this conflict would have required the critics to recognize suburbia as a site of rich resources and opportunity, a desirable place that many "outsiders" were clamoring to enter. Few critics bothered to reconcile the drive for equality in housing with their own portrayals of oppressive life in the "burbs," which ended up rendering whites the victims and people of color invisible.

How did reality stack up with the images of dream or nightmare? The simple answer is, it lay somewhere in the middle. This was the finding of several sociologists in the 1960s who set out to challenge what they called "the myth of suburbia," a reference to the polemics dominating the public discourse. Scholars like Bennett Berger, Herbert Gans, and William Dobriner found that a move to suburbia did not change people as drastically as either the boosters or critics claimed.[1] Rather, people continued to make life choices based on factors like class, ethnicity, religion, and personal preference. Collectively, the work of these scholars challenged the notion of environmental determinism.[2] Historians have been slower to document the social history of postwar suburbia, but we do know several things that counteract some of the stereotypes: suburbs continued to vary widely by class, suggesting a multiplicity of suburban experiences rather than a single one; suburban women were entering the workforce in substantial numbers even by 1960, and they were often highly engaged in local politics; and suburbia was characterized by religious and ethnic—and to a lesser extent racial—diversity.

Despite what we are learning about everyday life in postwar suburbia, the extreme images generated by postwar critics have had remarkable staying power. In popular culture especially, the depiction of suburbia as an oppressive place, waiting for protagonists to break out and express themselves, is a theme oft repeated, particularly in films like *American Beauty, Pleasantville, The Truman Show,* and *Far From Heaven*. Even the television series *Desperate Housewives* plays on the image of corruption lying just beneath a picture-perfect surface. Even though more and more Americans live suburban lives that bear little resemblance to these portrayals, the myth of suburbia continues to resonate in the popular imagination.

DOCUMENTS

The notion that the environment of mass suburbia homogenized the people who lived there was a central theme of postwar suburban critiques. In **Document 10-1**, folksinger Malvina Reynolds expresses this idea in the song, "Little Boxes," evoking an image of a "soulless landscape producing a soulless populace," in the words of scholar Robert Beuka.[3] The song became a national hit when Pete Seeger recorded it in 1964. **Document 10-2** comes from perhaps the most important work of suburban criticism of the 1950s, William Whyte's *Organization Man*. Whyte, an editor at *Fortune*

magazine, explores what he perceived as a broad, dangerous postwar trend toward conformity and "group think" at the expense of individualism. He attributes this shift partly to increased mobility among organization men, who endured numerous job transfers which made them desperate for social ties. These tendencies were most apparent in the mass-produced suburbs, which he calls the "dormitories" of organization man. Whyte devotes the final third of his book to an analysis of life in suburbia, based mainly on his observations of Park Forest, Illinois. His work had tremendous influence on subsequent suburban critics—journalists, novelists, filmmakers, and urban scholars—who portrayed suburbia as a place defined, above all, by conformity. **Document 10-3**, Dan Weiner's 1953 photograph of commuters returning to Park Forest, Illinois from Chicago, captures the everyday faces of William Whyte's organization men (and women). In **Document 10-4**, the renowned urbanist, Lewis Mumford, wages a deep, multilayered critique of mass-produced suburbia, offering a remarkably different reading of suburban social life from that of Whyte. Mumford was an enthusiastic proponent of Ebenezer Howard's "Garden City" idea, perceiving it as the solution to the ills of the modern metropolis. Yet mass suburbs, he believed, were a distorted, disastrous outcome of that original concept. Mumford ultimately poses a chilling *1984*-like scenario, where suburbanites in their mass-produced homes become captive to automation, mass media, and excruciating isolation.

The condition of women in suburbia was also a key concern of postwar critics. The central text was Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), considered by many the bible of the 1960s woman's liberation movement. In **Document 10-5,** Friedan describes the "problem that has no name," a reference to the deep unease of the dutiful suburban housewife, and its devastating consequences—from psychological damage to civic disengagement. Friedan also explores the colluding role of suburbia, which she argues fostered an environment that maximized busywork and minimized opportunity for female privacy and autonomy. **Document 10-6**, which accompanied a 1961 *Reader's Digest* article entitled "Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped," graphically depicts many of the ideas synthesized by Friedan. **Document 10-7** reports on how women in one suburban community, Great Neck, New York, began a tentative exploration of feminism. While this *McCall's* magazine article confirms many of Friedan's claims, it also suggests that women were not passive witnesses to their circumstances as suburban housewives. This article was one among many that appeared in the national press by the early 1970s, reporting on the emergence of female activism and feminism in suburbia.

A whole genre of fiction that probed suburban dysfunction was another influential strand of the suburban critique. Writers such as John Keats, Sloan Wilson, John Marquand, Richard Yates, and John Cheever became famous for works depicting a superficial suburban world. **Document 10-8** is a compelling example of this fiction by the writer perhaps most closely associated with the genre, John Cheever. Cheever's numerous short stories, many set in the imaginary suburb of Shady Hill, explored the nuances and contradictions of middle-class identity in suburbia. His tales are notable for their complex characterizations and themes, often probing tensions between the external and internal lives of suburbanites. The story reprinted here, "O Youth and Beauty!", originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1953. **Document 10-9** offers images from Peter Blake's influential book, *God's Own Junkyard.* Juxtaposing images of natural wonder with garish sprawl, Blake's work epitomized the aesthetic critique of postwar suburbia and heralded the rise of suburban environmentalism. **Document 10-10** is a biting satire of suburbia from the writers of *Mad Magazine*. Spoofing Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago," a majestic ode to the "City of the Big Shoulders," *Mad* presents "Chicago Suburb," home of the shallow and absurd.

By the 1960s, the onslaught of suburban criticism prompted a backlash among sociologists, who approached their work with skepticism about the power of suburbia to shape behavior. They asked basic empirical questions: Did moving to the suburbs change people? Can we accurately speak of "a suburban way of life"? In **Document 10-11**, sociologist Bennett Berger answers "no" to both queries, and he offers an astute explanation for why the suburbs had become the target of such intense criticism. His article, "The Myth of Suburbia," remains one of the most cogent statements on this topic even forty years after its publication. Berger grounded his understanding of postwar suburbia in a book-length study of Milpitas, California, a suburb in San Francisco's East Bay. In that work, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (1960), he found that residents retained the lifeways and outlooks of their former city life. While it represented an important counterpoint to works on white-collar suburbia, *Working-Class Suburb* received much less attention—and had less public impact—than works like *Organization Man,* a fact that attests to the immense influence of the suburban critique on the public imagination. **Document 10-12** is an excerpt from sociologist Herbert Gans's study, *The Levittowners,* which he wrote as a participant-observer after living in

Levittown (now Willingboro), New Jersey from 1958 to 1960. While Gans observed some of the same social patterns that Whyte described in Park Forest, he interpreted those patterns very differently, seeing in suburbia a healthy, humane, and legitimate way of life.

Why were social critics so vehemently against suburbia? What was it about suburbia that provoked such an emotional reaction? What underlying factors may have motivated their critiques? What role did the democratization—or the opening up of suburbia to a broad class of Americans—play in inciting these criticisms? In your opinion, what was the worst offense of the suburban way of life? Can we safely speak of a suburban way of life? Do you think the critics were right—and still are—about life in suburbia? What aspects ring true, or not?

10-1. FOLKSINGER MALVINA REYNOLDS CRITIQUES SUBURBIA IN SONG, 1962

"Little Boxes"
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky,
And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses
All went to the university,
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same,
And there's doctors and lawyers,
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky,
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course
And drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children
And the children go to school,
And the children go to summer camp,
And then to the university
Where they are put in boxes
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business
And marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.

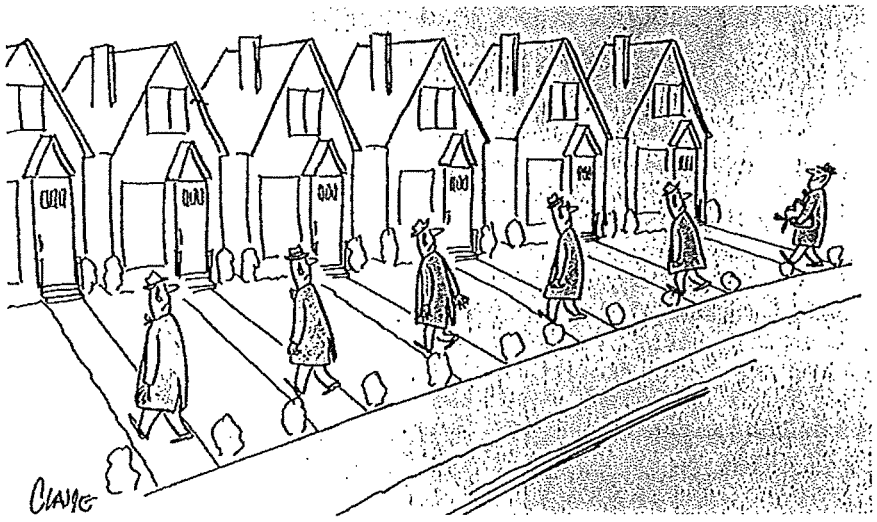


Figure 10-1 Conformity was the central complaint of many suburban critics in the postwar years. This cartoon by Claude Smith, Jr. originally appeared in *The New Yorker,* 1956. Reprinted by Permission of the Estate of Claude Smith, Jr.

10-2. WILLIAM WHYTE DESCRIBES THE "ORGANIZATION MAN" IN SUBURBIA, 1956

Source: William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). Used by permission of Alexandra Whyte.

This book is about the organization man. If the term is vague, it is because I can think of no other way to describe the people I am talking about. They are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for The Organization. The ones I am talking about *belong* to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. Only a few are top managers or ever will be...most are destined to live poised in a middle area that still awaits a satisfactory euphemism....

The corporation man is the most conspicuous example, but he is only one, for the collectivization so visible in the corporation has affected almost every field of work. Blood brother to the business trainee off to join Du Pont is the seminary student who will end up in the church hierarchy, the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics Ph.D. in a government laboratory,...the engineering graduate in the huge drafting room at Lockheed, the young apprentice in a Wall Street law factory....

The organization man seeks a redefinition of his place on earth—a faith that will satisfy him that what he must endure has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface. He needs, in short, something that will do for him what the Protestant Ethic did once. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, a body of thought has been coalescing that does that.

I am going to call it a Social Ethic....

By Social Ethic I mean that contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual. Its major propositions are three: a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in "belongingness" as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in the application of science to achieve the belongingness....

The New Suburbia: Organization Man at Home

I now turn to the Organization Man at home...I am going to examine him in the communities that have become his dormitories—the great package suburbs that have sprung up outside our cities since the war....

For they are not merely great conglomerations of mass housing. They are a new social institution, and while the variations in them are many, wherever one goes—the courts of Park Forest [Illinois], the patios of Park Merced in San Francisco, Philadelphia's Drexelbrook, the new Levittown, Pennsylvania—there is an unmistakable similarity in the way of life.

It is a communal way of life, and the residents are well aware of it. They are of many minds how to describe it. Sometimes they lean to analogies like the frontier, or the early colonial settlements. Other times they are a little more wry; "sorority house with kids,"...or...a lay version of Army post life. But no matter how sharp the coinages—"a womb with a view," "a Russia, only with money"—it is a way of life they find suited to their wants, their needs, and their times....

Park Forest, the community I studied most intensively, has its unique features, but its most salient characteristic is that it is virtually a controlled sample of organization people. As elsewhere, there are other kinds of people too, and for many a newcomer from the city such communities are an education in middle-class values. What might be called the modal man, however, is a twenty-five-to-thirty-five-year-old white-collar organization man with a wife, a salary between $6,000 and $7,000, one child, and another on the way....

The people who went to Park Forest went there because it was the best housing for the money.... The space for the money, the amenities not elsewhere available, and, most important, the fact that it was so well set up for children have been in most cases the dominant factors.

Park Foresters, in short, went there for quite rational, and eminently sensible,

reasons. Once there, however, they created something over and above the original bargain. Together, they developed a social atmosphere of striking vigor.... The developers were quick to recognize it. At first they had advertised Park Forest as housing. Now they began advertising happiness....

Here's the way they went:

You Belong
in PARK FOREST!
The moment you come to our town you know:
You're welcome
You're part of a big group
You can live in a friendly small town instead of a lonely big city.
You can have friends who want you—and you can enjoy being with them.
Come out. Find out about the spirit of Park Forest...

The ads are quite right. Let's take, for example, a couple we shall call Dot and Charlie Adams. Charlie, a corporation trainee, is uprooted from the Newark office, arrives at Apartment 8, Court M-12.[4] It's a hell of a day—the kids are crying, Dot is half sick with exhaustion, and the movers won't be finished till late.

But soon, because M-12 is a "happy" court, the neighbors will come over to introduce themselves. In an almost inordinate display of decency, some will help them unpack and around suppertime two of the girls will come over with a hot casserole and another with a percolator full of hot coffee. Within a few days the children will have found playmates, Dot will be *Kaffeeklatsching* and sunbathing with the girls like an old-timer, and Charlie, who finds that Ed Robey in Apartment 5 went through officers' training school with him, will be enrolled in the Court Poker Club. The Adamses are, in a word, *in*—and someday soon, when another new couple, dazed and hungry, moves in, the Adamses will make their thanks by helping them to be likewise.

In the court, they find, their relationships with others transcend mere neighborliness. Except for the monastic orders and the family itself, there is probably no other social institution in the U.S. in which there is such a communal sharing of property. Except for the $200 or $300 put aside for the next baby, few of the transients have as yet been able to accumulate much capital or earthly possessions, and so they share to make the best of it. One lawn mower (with each man doing his allotted stint) may do for the whole court. For the wives there may be a baby-sitting "bank" (i.e., when one wife baby-sits for another she is credited with the time, and when she wishes to draw on it one of the wives who has a debit to repay will sit for her). To hoard possessions is frowned upon; books, silverware, and tea services are constantly rotated, and the children feel free to use one another's bikes and toys without asking. "We laughed at first at how the Marxist society had finally arrived," one executive says, "but I think the real analogy is to the pioneers."

But the court social life, important as it is in rooting the transient, is only part of the acclimation. Before long, Charlie Adams may feel the urge to shoot out a few extra roots here and there and, having normal joining instincts, may think a mild involvement in some community-wide organization just the thing. When the matter is bruited to him he may be tentative—nothing strenuous, understand, awfully busy with company work; just want to help out a little. Instantaneously, or no longer than it takes one person to telephone another, the news is abroad. Charlie will never be quite the same again.

He has plunged into a hotbed of Participation. With sixty-six adult organizations and a population turnover that makes each one of them insatiable for new members, Park Forest probably swallows up more civic energy per hundred people than any other community in the country....

On the matter of privacy, suburbanites have mixed feelings. Fact one, of course, is that there isn't much privacy....[P]eople don't bother to knock and they come and go furiously. The lack of privacy, furthermore, is retroactive. "They ask you all sorts of questions about what you *were* doing," one resident puts it. "Who was it that stopped in last night? Who were those people from Chicago last week? You're never alone, even when you think you are."

Less is sacred. "It's wonderful," says one young wife. "You find yourself discussing

all your personal problems with your neighbors—things that back in South Dakota we would have kept to ourselves." As time goes on, this capacity for self-revelation grows; and on the most intimate details of family life, court people become amazingly frank with one another. No one, they point out, ever need face a problem alone....

But there is another side to the coin. Contemporary prophets of belongingness point out the warmth and security the tight-knit group produces for the individual, but they generally stop short at diagnosing some of the other things it produces.... It is not the question of conformity, though many speak of it as such. It is, rather, the question of determining *when* one is conforming, when adjustment is selflessness, or surrender. It is a moral dilemma—the one, I believe, central to the organization man....

In the tight-knit group...each member feels an equity in others' behavior. With communication so intensive, the slightest misunderstanding can generate a whole series of consequences. If Charley ducks his turn at the lawn mower, if little Johnny sasses Mrs. Erdlick just once more, if Gladys forgets to return the pound of coffee she borrowed, the frictions become a concern of the group and not just of the principals.

The more vigorous the search for common denominators, the stronger the pressure to alikeness. Sometimes this extends even to house design. The architects have tried to vary the facades of each house, and one might assume that in putting up aluminum awnings, making alterations, repainting and the like, residents try hard to enlarge the differences. This is not always so; in some areas residents have apparently agreed to unify the block with a common design and color scheme for garages and such.

In such blocks an otherwise minor variation becomes blatant deviance; if a man were to paint his garage fire-engine red in a block where the rest of the garages are white, he would literally and psychologically make himself a marked man. So with fences; if they are obviously designed to keep the children safe, eyebrows are not raised. But if the height or elaborateness of the fence indicates other motives, there will be feeling....

Reprisal is inevitable. The sanctions are not obvious—indeed, people are often unconscious of wielding them—but the look in the eye, the absence of a smile, the inflection of a hello, can be exquisite punishment, and they have brought more than one to a nervous breakdown. And the more social the block, the rougher it is on those who don't fit in....

It is frightening to see the cruelty with which an otherwise decent group can punish the deviate, particularly when the deviate is unfortunate enough to be located in the middle of the group, rather than isolated somewhat out of benevolence's way. "Estelle is a case," says one resident of a highly active block. "She was dying to get in with the gang when she moved in. She is a very warmhearted gal and is always trying to help people, but she's, well—sort of elaborate about it. One day she decided to win over everybody by giving an afternoon party for the gals. Poor thing, she did it all wrong. The girls turned up in their bathing suits and slacks, as usual, and here she had little doilies and silver and everything spread around. Ever since then it's been almost like a planned campaign to keep her out of things. Even her two-year-old daughter gets kept out of the kids' parties. It's really pitiful. She sits there in her beach chair out front just dying for someone to come and *Kaffeeklatsch* with her, and right across the street four or five of the girls and their kids will be yakking away. Every time they suddenly all laugh at some joke she thinks they are laughing at her. She came over here yesterday and cried all afternoon. She told me she and her husband are thinking about moving somewhere else so they can make a fresh start." (The woman in question has since moved.)...

Is this simple conformity? I am not for the moment trying to argue that yielding to the group is something to be admired, but I do think that there is more of a moral problem here than is generally conceded in most discussions of American conformity....

The group is a tyrant; so also is it a friend, and *it is both at once.* The two qualities cannot easily be separated, for what gives the group its power over the man is the same cohesion that gives it its warmth. This is the duality that confuses choice.

10-3. THE COMMUTERS OF PARK FOREST, ILLINOIS, 1953

Figure 10-2 Commuters crowded on platform returning from work in Loop in Chicago, Dan Weiner, January 1, 1953. Like the era's myriad photographs of mass-produced suburban housing, this image of commuters clad in business attire conveys the impression of sameness that social critics derided. Courtesy of Time Life Pictures/Getty Images, Image #50603608. All Rights Reserved.

10-4. LEWIS MUMFORD POINTS TO THE FAILURES OF MODERN SUBURBIA, 1961

Source: Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

To be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape: to live in this Domain of Arnheim a self-centered life, in which private fantasy and caprice would have license to express themselves openly, in short, to withdraw like a monk and live like a prince—this was the purpose of the original creators of the suburb. They proposed in effect to create an asylum, in which they could, as individuals, overcome the chronic defects of civilization while still commanding at will the privileges and benefits of urban society. This utopia proved to be, up to a point, a realizable one: so enchanting that those who contrived it failed to see the fatal penalty attached to it—the penalty of popularity, the fatal inundation of a mass movement whose very numbers would wipe out the goods each individual sought for his own domestic circle, and, worse, replace them with a life that was not even a cheap counterfeit, but rather the grim antithesis.

The ultimate outcome of the suburb's alienation from the city became visible only in the twentieth century....In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible....

The Suburban Way of Life

As an attempt to recover what was missing in the city, the suburban exodus could be amply justified, for it was concerned with primary human needs. But there was another side: the temptation to retreat from unpleasant realities, to shirk public duties, and to find the whole meaning of life in the most elemental social group, the family, or even in the still more isolated and self-centered individual. What was properly a beginning was treated as an end....

[T]oo soon, in breaking away from the city, the part became a substitute for the whole, even as a single phase of life, that of childhood, became the pattern for all the seven ages of man. As leisure generally increased, play became the serious business of life; and the golf course, the country club, the swimming pool, and the cocktail party became the frivolous counterfeits of a more varied and significant life. Thus in reacting against the disadvantages of the crowded city, the suburb itself became an over-specialized community, more and more committed to relaxation and play as ends in themselves. Compulsive play fast became the acceptable alternative to compulsive work: with small gain either in freedom or vital stimulus....

Families in Space

On the fringe of mass Suburbia, even the advantages of the primary neighborhood group disappear. The cost of this detachment in space from other men is out of all proportion to its supposed benefits. The end product is an encapsulated life, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set....Every part of this life, indeed, will come through official channels and be under supervision. Untouched by human hand at one end: untouched by human spirit at the other. Those who accept this existence might as well be encased in a rocket hurtling through space, so narrow are their choices, so limited and deficient their permitted responses. Here indeed we find "The Lonely Crowd."...

Does this not explain in some degree the passiveness and docility that has crept into our existence?...Suburbia offers poor

facilities for meeting, conversation, collective debate, and common action—it favors silent conformity, not rebellion or counter-attack. So Suburbia has become the favored home of a new kind of absolutism: invisible but all-powerful.

10-5. BETTY FRIEDAN, *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*, 1963

The Problem That Has No Name

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?"...

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. They changed the sheets on the beds twice a week instead of once, took the rug-hooking class in adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed of having a career. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."...

If a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it....

But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, "the problem." And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not alone.

Gradually I came to realize that the problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America. As a magazine writer I often interviewed women about problems with their children, or their marriages, or their houses, or their communities. But after

a while I began to recognize the telltale signs of this other problem....Sometimes I sensed the problem, not as a reporter, but as a suburban housewife, for during this time I was also bringing up my own three children in Rockland County, New York....

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say "I feel empty somehow...incomplete." Or, she would say, "I feel as if I don't exist." Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilizer. Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby. Sometimes, she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: "A tired feeling...I get so angry with the children it scares me...I feel like crying without any reason." (A Cleveland doctor called it "the housewife's syndrome.")...

A mother of four who left college at nineteen to get married told me:

> I've tried everything women are supposed to do—hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn't leave you anything to think about—any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my home. There's no problem you can even put a name to. But I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?...

If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes....It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."

Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available....

One of the great changes in America, since World War II, has been the explosive movement to the suburbs, those ugly and endless sprawls which are becoming a national problem. Sociologists point out that a distinguishing feature of these suburbs is the fact that the women who live there are better educated than city women, and that the great majority are full-time housewives.

At first glance, one might suspect that the very growth and existence of the suburbs causes educated modern American women to become and remain full-time housewives. Or did the postwar suburban explosion come, at least in part, as a result of the coincidental choice of millions of American women to "seek fulfillment in the home?" Among the women I interviewed, the decision to move to the suburbs "for the children's sake" followed the decision to give up job or profession and become a full-time housewife, usually after the birth of the first baby, or the second, depending on the age of the woman when the mystique hit....

When the mystique took over...a new breed of women came to the suburbs. They...were perfectly willing to accept the suburban community as they found it (their only problem was "how to fit in"); they were perfectly willing to fill their days with the trivia of housewifery. Women of this kind...refuse to take policy-making positions in community organizations; they will only collect for Red Cross or March of Dimes or Scouts or be den mothers or take the lesser PTA jobs. Their resistance to serious community responsibility is usually explained by "I can't take the time from my family." But much of their time is spent in meaningless busywork. The kind of community work they choose does not challenge their intelligence—or even, sometimes, fill a real function. Nor do they derive much personal satisfaction from it—but it does fill time.

So, increasingly, in the new bedroom suburbs, the really interesting volunteer jobs—the leadership of the cooperative nurseries, the free libraries, the school board posts, the selectmenships and, in some suburbs, even

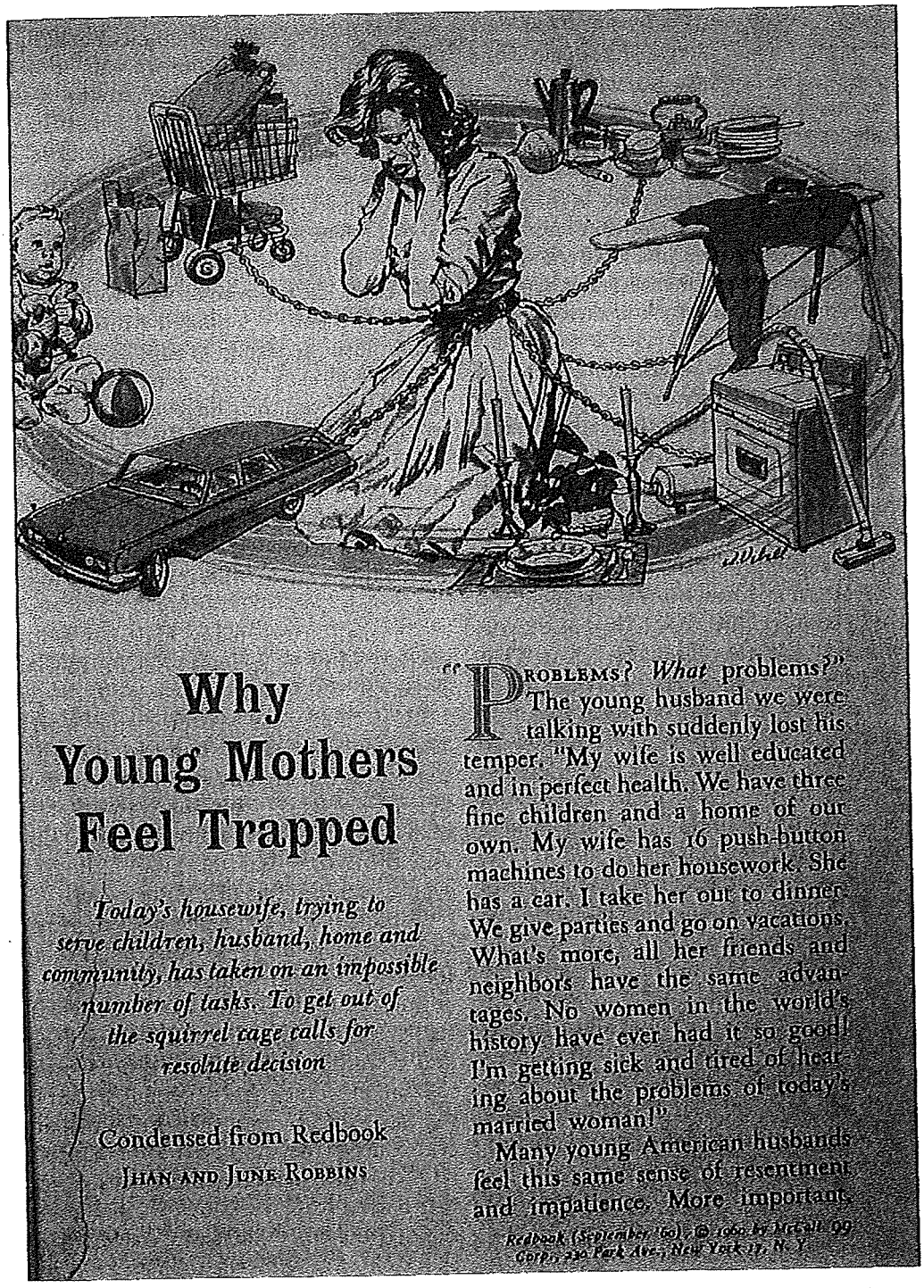
the PTA presidencies—are filled by men. The housewife who doesn't "have time" to take serious responsibility in the community, like the woman who doesn't "have time" to pursue a professional career, evades a serious commitment through which she might finally realize herself; she evades it by stepping up her domestic routine until she is truly trapped.

The dimensions of the trap seem physically unalterable, as the busyness that fills the housewife's day seems inescapably necessary. But is that domestic trap an illusion, despite its all-too-solid reality, an illusion created by the feminine mystique? Take, for instance, the open plan of the contemporary "ranch" or split-level house, $14,990 to $54,990, which has been built in the millions from Roslyn Heights [Long Island] to the Pacific Palisades [Los Angeles]. They give the illusion of more space for less money. But the women to whom they are sold almost *have* to live the feminine mystique. There are no true walls or doors; the woman in the beautiful electronic kitchen is never separated from her children. She need never feel alone for a minute, need never be by herself. She can forget her own identity in those noisy open-plan houses. The open plan also helps expand the housework to fill the time available. In what is basically one free-flowing room, instead of many rooms separated by walls and stairs, continual messes continually need picking up....

For the very able woman, who has the ability to create culturally as well as biologically, the only possible rationalization is to convince herself—as the new mystique tries so hard to convince her—that the minute physical details of child care are indeed mystically creative; that her children will be tragically deprived if she is not there every minute; that the dinner she gives the boss's wife is as crucial to her husband's career as the case he fights in court or the problem he solves in the laboratory. And because husband and children are soon out of the house most of the day, she must keep on having new babies, or somehow make the minutiae of housework itself important enough, necessary enough, hard enough, creative enough to justify her very existence....

It is the mystique of feminine fulfillment, and the immaturity it breeds, that prevents women from doing the work of which they are capable.... That housewifery can, must, expand to fill the time available when there is no other purpose in life seems fairly evident. After all, with no other purpose in her life, if the housework were done in an hour, and the children off to school, the bright, energetic housewife would find the emptiness of her days unbearable.

10-6. THE TRAPPED SUBURBAN MOTHER, 1961



Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped

Today's housewife, trying to serve children, husband, home and community, has taken on an impossible number of tasks. To get out of the squirrel cage calls for resolute decision

Condensed from Redbook

JHAN AND JUNE ROBBINS

"PROBLEMS? *What* problems?" The young husband we were talking with suddenly lost his temper. "My wife is well educated and in perfect health. We have three fine children and a home of our own. My wife has 16 push-button machines to do her housework. She has a car. I take her out to dinner. We give parties and go on vacations. What's more, all her friends and neighbors have the same advantages. No women in the world's history have ever had it so good! I'm getting sick and tired of hearing about the problems of today's married woman!"

Many young American husbands feel this same sense of resentment and impatience. More importantly,

Figure 10-3 By the early 1960s, writers began to question the apparent privileges of suburban housewives, revealing a level of dissatisfaction that soon exploded in the women's movement. The monotony of housework, chauffering kids and husbands, and the isolation felt by some suburban housewives underlay this unhappiness. *Reader's Digest* 78 (January 1961), 99.

10-7. SUBURBAN WOMEN IN GREAT NECK, NEW YORK, EXPLORE FEMINISM, 1973

Source: Jean Pascoe, "Suburban Women's Lib: Turning Mrs. into Ms.," *McCall's* 100 (September 1973).

This fall one of the hottest items in the adult-education sphere will be women's liberation. Although courses in fem-lib have been sweeping college campuses for years, they have just begun to catch on among housewives in the suburbs.

Women's studies, of course, encompass all the feminist territory, from personal consciousness-raising to the History of Women in America. Are these courses worth taking? Do they really help women reevaluate their life situations? Provide new solutions for their discontent?

"Yes," say almost every one of 32 suburban wives just finishing the fifth and final session of a course called "Ms.: The New Status of Women," in Great Neck, New York. The course, typical of those offered in many parts of the country, cost $12 and featured four speakers—all professional women—who talked on sex, money, law and jobs and what they mean to women. Finally, a group of housewives demonstrated a consciousness-raising session to the class.

By the end of the course, a few enrollees still felt that they had found no place for themselves in women's lib. "My husband puts no restrictions on me," commented one such woman. "I do clean the house and cook, but this requires minimal time and I have a lot left over to be what I want." All but five of the class members, however, did change their views about women's traditional roles as wife, mother and sexual being. Many had also started to change their lives.

Typically the Ms.-class member at Great Neck's night school was slightly over 40 and married, with children still living at home. Frequently she was inspired to take the course by her young feminist-minded daughter. She did not have to work to supplement the family exchequer. In fact, she had it so good that she felt she had forfeited—for a certain security—her right to be her own person. "I'm somebody's wife and somebody's mother rather than a separate human being" was the general thought that cropped up again and again. One woman of 50 put it specifically: "I had come to the realization that for too many years I had been an expendable person—filling whatever niche I was placed in. In doing so, I had negated myself completely."

For these women, the adult-education course seemed a more respectable way to find out what the women's movement might hold for them than plunging directly into a consciousness-raising group. Besides, most of them already knew what response that would get from their husbands: negative.

As they began to think about becoming more assertive and making demands of their own, guilt feelings were the first to surface. "I feel that I must have more discussion about women's lib at home, yet I'm fearful of making waves," one 38-year-old mother confessed.

"I was leery of many liberated attitudes and afraid of exposing myself to too much freedom," said another wife, 40, "because I felt it could pose a danger to a marriage based on 'old' ways. It could disturb too much between my husband and me if I went all out—which is truly the way I feel." But many decided anyway "to try to free myself and then work out the guilt feelings that would engender," as one of them said.

Although for some the course provided the necessary nudge to start making plans for going back to school or to work, it was at home that the Great Neck housewives actually began expressing long-buried feelings and discarding long-held attitudes. After a session on women and sex many began talking more openly with their husbands about sexual needs they had been too embarrassed to acknowledge or sometimes even to recognize before. After a session on money, several realized that they had been downright irresponsible in leaving the management of the family's finances entirely to their husbands.

At the end of the course, Great Neck men, by and large, were still somewhat less than enthusiastic. Typical was this description by a class member of her husband's reaction: "He felt very angry and threatened during the ear-

ly stages. He made deriding remarks. Now he is beginning to accept it, but not joyously."

Gradually, however, many of the women noticed that "speaking more openly with husband, children and friends about my feelings all along the line—from sex to work" was having positive results. "It got both my husband and me thinking and talking," said one woman.

There will be no bra-burning, either real or symbolic, in Great Neck—at least not among these women. For the most part, they have chosen to work quietly on their own heads, leaving drastic changes for later—if ever.

10-8. JOHN CHEEVER'S SHORT STORY, "O YOUTH AND BEAUTY!" 1953

AT THE TAG END of nearly every long, large Saturday-night party in the suburb of Shady Hill, when almost everybody who was going to play golf or tennis in the morning had gone home hours ago and the ten or twelve people remaining seemed powerless to bring the evening to an end although the gin and whiskey were running low, and here and there a woman who was sitting out her husband would have begun to drink milk; when everybody had lost track of time, and the baby-sitters who were waiting at home for these diehards would have long since stretched out on the sofa and fallen into a deep sleep, to dream about cooking-contest prizes, ocean voyages, and romance; when the bellicose drunk, the crapshooter, the pianist, and the woman faced with the expiration of her hopes had all expressed themselves; when every proposal—to go to the Farquarsons' for breakfast, to go swimming, to go and wake up the Townsends, to go here and go there—died as soon as it was made, then Trace Bearden would begin to chide Cash Bentley about his age and thinning hair. The chiding was preliminary to moving the living-room furniture. Trace and Cash moved the tables and the chairs, the sofas and the fire screen, the woodbox and the footstool; and when they had finished, you wouldn't know the place. Then if the host had a revolver, he would be asked to produce it. Cash would take off his shoes and assume a starting crouch behind a sofa. Trace would fire the weapon out of an open window, and if you were new to the community and had not understood what the preparations were about, you would then realize that you were watching a hurdle race. Over the sofa went Cash, over the tables, over the fire screen and the woodbox. It was not exactly a race, since Cash ran it alone, but it was extraordinary to see this man of forty surmount so many obstacles so gracefully. There was not a piece of furniture in Shady Hill that Cash could not take in his stride. The race ended with cheers, and, presently the party would break up.

Cash was, of course, an old track star, but he was never aggressive or tiresome about his brilliant past. The college where he had spent his youth had offered him a paying job on the alumni council, but he had refused it, realizing that that part of his life was ended. Cash and his wife, Louise, had two children, and they lived in a medium-cost ranch house on Alewives Lane. They belonged to the country club, although they could not afford it, but in the case of the Bentleys nobody ever pointed this out, and Cash was one of the best-liked men in Shady Hill. He was still slender—he was careful about his weight—and he walked to the train in the morning with a light and vigorous step that marked him as an athlete. His hair was thin, and there were mornings when his eyes looked bloodshot, but this did not detract much from a charming quality of stubborn youthfulness.

In business Cash had suffered reverses and disappointments, and the Bentleys had many money worries. They were always late with their tax payments and their mortgage payments, and the drawer of the hall table was stuffed with unpaid bills; it was always touch and go with the Bentleys and the bank. Louise looked pretty enough on Saturday night, but her life was exacting and monotonous. In the pockets of her suits, coats, and dresses there were little wads and scraps of paper on which was written: "Oleomargarine, frozen spinach, Kleenex, dog biscuit, hamburger,

pepper, lard...." When she was still half awake in the morning, she was putting on the water for coffee and diluting the frozen orange juice. Then she would be wanted by the children. She would crawl under the bureau on her hands and knees to find a sock for Toby. She would lie flat on her belly and wiggle under the bed (getting dust up her nose) to find a shoe for Rachel. Then there were the housework, the laundry, and the cooking, as well as the demands of the children. There always seemed to be shoes to put on and shoes to take off, snowsuits to be zipped and unzipped, bottoms to be wiped, tears to be dried, and when the sun went down (she saw it set from the kitchen window) there was the supper to be cooked, the baths, the bedtime story, and the Lord's Prayer. With the sonorous words of the Our Father in a darkened room the children's day was over, but the day was far from over for Louise Bentley. There were the darning, the mending, and some ironing to do, and after sixteen years of housework she did not seem able to escape her chores even while she slept. Snowsuits, shoes, baths, and groceries seemed to have permeated her subconscious. Now and then she would speak in her sleep—so loudly that she woke her husband. "I can't afford veal cutlets," she said one night. Then she sighed uneasily and was quiet again

By the standards of Shady Hill, the Bentleys were a happily married couple, but they had their ups and downs. Cash could be very touchy at times. When he came home after a bad day at the office and found that Louise, for some good reason, had not started supper, he would be ugly. "Oh, for Christ sake!" he would say, and go into the kitchen and heat up some frozen food. He drank some whiskey to relax himself during this ordeal, but it never seemed to relax him, and he usually burned the bottom out of a pan, and when they sat down for supper the dining space would be full of smoke. It was only a question of time before they were plunged into a bitter quarrel. Louise would run upstairs, throw herself onto the bed and sob. Cash would grab the whiskey bottle and dose himself. These rows, in spite of the vigor with which Cash and Louise entered into them, were the source of a great deal of pain for both of them. Cash would sleep downstairs on the sofa, but sleep never repaired the damage, once the trouble had begun, and if they met in the morning, they would be at one another's throats in a second. Then Cash would leave for the train, and, as soon as the children had been taken to nursery school, Louise would put on her coat and cross the grass to the Beardens' house. She would cry into a cup of warmed-up coffee and tell Lucy Bearden her troubles. What was the meaning of marriage? What was the meaning of love? Lucy always suggested that Louise get a job. It would give her emotional and financial independence, and that, Lucy said, was what she needed.

The next night, things would get worse. Cash would not come home for dinner at all, but would stumble in at about eleven, and the whole sordid wrangle would be repeated, with Louise going to bed in tears upstairs and Cash again stretching out on the living-room sofa. After a few days and nights of this, Louise would decide that she was at the end of her rope. She would decide to go and stay with her married sister in Mamaroneck. She usually chose a Saturday, when Cash would be at home, for her departure. She would pack a suitcase and get her War Bonds from the desk. Then she would take a bath and put on her best slip. Cash, passing the bedroom door, would see her. Her slip was transparent, and suddenly he was all repentance, tenderness, charm, wisdom, and love. "Oh, my darling!" he would groan, and when they went downstairs to get a bite to eat about an hour later, they would be sighing and making cow eyes at one another; they would be the happiest married couple in the whole eastern United States. It was usually at about this time that Lucy Bearden turned up with the good news that she had found a job for Louise. Lucy would ring the doorbell, and Cash, wearing a bathrobe, would let her in She would be brief with Cash, naturally, and hurry into the dining room to tell poor Louise the good news. "Well, that's very nice of you to have looked," Louise would say wanly, "but I don't think that I want a job any more. I don't think that Cash wants me to work, do you, sweetheart?" Then she would turn her big dark eyes on Cash, and you could