

A Run at Evening

You are running through a residential area at evening, when you notice that the houses seem nicer than they did a mile or so back: they are white, with shutters, there are sprinklers on the green lawns, the sunlight is slanting through the trees, kids are playing, parents are looking fondly on. You keep running, the place begins to seem like a paradise. Eventually, despite your rule, you stop, and walk up to one group of neighbors who are talking on the sidewalk. You ask where you are. They laugh noncommittally. “Tell me about your lives here”, you exclaim. “Everything seems so nice.” They invite you in for tea. Greenery grows outside the windows of the beautiful kitchen into which you are led, it is like something out of *Country Living*. There is a checkered tablecloth, the smell of clean laundry in the air, kids voices can be heard in the back yard. No sound of TV. Birds chirp in the trees. “This is amazing”, you say to them, as you sip your tea. “How have you managed this? How much do these places cost? Where did you find each other?” Again, the smiles. The woman offers you more tea. A little girl comes up to show her mom a truck, explain something about it. You ask if this is part of the town you came from, or another town. “Well, yes,” they reply, “in a manner of speaking.” “Come on,” you say, “why are you being so reluctant to give details?” An interruption prevents an answer. “Well, can I at least take a walk around, look at your back yard?” You can just glimpse it through the window: ancient trees, shade, you sense that the air will be a bit cool now that evening is drawing on. You can see kids’ toys lying in the grass. There is no sound of traffic, you realize. “I would very much like to move here!” you say. “The last street I remember being on was — , so the map should show me where exactly you are.” The neighbors are friendly, but now it is clear that they would like you to move on. You say goodbye, resume your run, and then see, coming down a tree-covered steep embankment on the right, a little boy scurrying, laughing, and behind him, an adult in a white cloak and hood. The adult is obviously tall and thin; he has his arms up, in a mock frightening gesture that apparently hasn’t frightened the boy at all. They run across the street in front of you, disappear down an embankment on the left. You feel eerie. You continue running, still looking at the beautiful houses but unable to stop thinking about the strange game the adult and the boy were playing. It is growing dark, and after a few more blocks, you know you are lost. You turn around and head back the way you came. You run through a barrier of pollards with flowers planted in them, and you are back among the ordinary, drab houses of your town. You turn around, look at the barrier, then run on, looking for the name of the street you’re on. But the city has apparently neglected to put up signs, or else the kids have removed them, so all you can see are the names of the side streets. Eventually you reach a T, turn left, seem vaguely to recognize where you are, and after half an hour, you back in your neighborhood. But now you can’t remember a single one of the side streets you passed on the street with no signs, and you realize you didn’t count streets after turning left at the T, and so it is very unlikely you will be able to find the strange neighborhood again, much less find out what game the tall, thin ghost and the little boy were playing.