

ENGL 120, Section 03
Professor Lincoln Caplan

River Oaks

By Hannah Shi

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The annual pilgrimage began the same way, with my family packed into the old Ford Explorer and my cheek pressed against its frosted windows. The few days when near constant humidity and heat surrendered to frigid air always came as the briefest of transitions to Houston's two seasons. Things remained the same until they weren't. For my 5-year-old self, the coming of winter brought a sort of magic; the Santa Claus my classmates gossiped about and the Jesus my pastor preached about emerged with a fresh vitality. On the icy roads, our car churned forward. Scenes shifted in flashing streaks of color – mansions replaced apartments, Whole Foods replaced Walmarts, poinsettias colored once blank streets. Our destination was only 17.6 miles away, but for my family and me, this place could not have been further from our reality.

River Oaks, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Houston, was not ours. We peered in as outsiders, walking through rows of mansions fortifying city blocks. Barely taller than my parents' knees, I gazed at glittering structures resembling castles in Disney movies. Boasting sweeping archways, cream-colored steps, and glowing windows, each house was decorated in

Christmas lights that hung like pearl necklaces. Yet, it was the oak trees that captured me. As I stared into the rich canopies, I saw lights brighter than stars scattered across branches. God had thrown constellations, light years away, down to Earth. In this fairyland, they dangled a mere hundred feet above me, suspended in mid-air. These stars were not shooting, but frozen in space. Still, I made my wishes. The magic of winter brought belief, the possibility of change. The fantasy ended an hour later; we left the shining palaces, returning to our sleeping suburb tucked away in Houston's outer arm.

Who lived behind those closed doors?

I soon found out. This year, at the age of seven, I would not need to wait until winter to return. Following weeks of persistent nagging, my parents agreed to take me to River Oaks, which everyone knew gave out the most precious of Halloween treasures: plastic vampire teeth, limited edition Kit Kats, and even king sized candy bars. I dashed from door to door, dressed in the same *qipao* my mother had me wear each Halloween. At each house, smiling white faces asked me what I was for Halloween. I never knew how to answer that question. The *qipao* I wore was not a costume. I was dressed as myself. It was impossible to explain that the shoes I wore everyday were two sizes too big; a Halloween costume to be worn one day a year was out of the question. For the first time, I realized how out of place I was. They assumed I was a Geisha girl, and even though I'm not Japanese, I didn't correct them.

River Oaks, like many wealthy Texas neighborhoods, has a history rooted in racism and privilege. A community that began as a country outpost for rich Houstonians expanded over time, as did discrimination: as the 1924 restrictions stated, “[A] property shall never be sold to another person not of the Caucasian race.” The white elite isolated themselves comfortably by

excluding populations deemed unfavorable to the moral and racial purity of the community. Deed restrictions barring black home buyers “protected” the neighborhood. When the courts eventually ruled segregation illegal, the homeowners of River Oaks resorted to more underground measures to prevent racial and religious “contamination.” A gentleman’s agreement acted as a collective understanding among homeowners: they would not sell their properties to Jews, blacks, and other people of color.

The legacy of River Oaks persists. According to the population estimates by the US Census, 86% of the community is white, making it one of the least diverse areas in Houston. The expensive properties, which in 2011 according to *Bloomberg Businessweek* made the neighborhood the seventh most expensive housing block in the U.S., are affordable only to a select population. When Hurricane Harvey, referred to later as the “500-year flood,” hit in the Fall of 2017, the disparities between communities became especially evident. River Oaks, positioned on relatively high ground and afforded ample flood safeguards, emerged from the devastation relatively well. The majority of Houston did not. In poorer communities with predominantly minority populations, Harvey uprooted trees, destroyed power lines, flooded swelling households, and drove desperate families to rooftops. The calamities brought by this natural disaster did not end there -- petrochemical plants, oil refineries, and shipping lanes near minority neighborhoods had spread toxic waste into those communities.

What eventually drove my parents into the city were not Christmas lights, Halloween candy, or flood protections. They made the move chasing public schools situated in wealthier zip codes, after a 2nd-grade teacher suggested that their daughter, a shy student who never spoke up in class, should be placed in a special-education classroom. They were more shocked to learn that, despite teaching me for months, the teacher had yet to learn my name.

We did not move to River Oaks, but we were closer. I spent the next 10 years never fully grounded in one place. The price of housing within the city meant that we migrated from rental property to rental property, never remaining in a single residence for longer than three years. At a certain point, we stopped owning furniture; the moves were easier that way. I learned from an early age not to bring anyone over. How could I explain the frequent moves, the cockroach-infested buildings, and the names of previous owners, *Mr. and Mrs. Cooley*, engraved on my bed frame?

Like the changing seasons, my parent's economic ascent came slowly and then all at once. The stars had aligned: the elusive American dream, which I believed to be attainable only by characters in Horatio Alger novels, was now ours. The software company my desperate and unemployed father had started in our apartment kitchen, gained traction, and in February of 2018, my parents purchased a property in River Oaks. They refer to this as their "greatest life achievement." It was a validation of their success. The unattainable had been attained.

The day we toured the house, the realtor gave us a puzzled look as my grandfather revealed a compass to double check that the house was south-facing, the optimal direction for feng shui. It was, and in a week the forms were signed and filed away. This place belonged to us. The date we moved into this new house was hand-picked by my mother, who needed to ensure it aligned with a lucky day on her Chinese calendar. We took our first steps onto the property, clenching bags of apples and oranges that symbolized peace and prosperity. My parents were beaming with pride; I gave them a smile. Together, we walked through the front door. Somehow, the emptiness of the

rooms gave the house life. For the first time in a decade, I saw huge stretches of space -- space that would fill with our belongings, our memories.

Still, a single year could not undo the previous 17 -- I would leave for college in August of 2019. I hid my turmoil. Nothing had changed since my younger years spent dreaming about Christmas lights. I was still an outsider, a misshapen puzzle piece, forced into a space where I didn't fit. I felt proud of my parents, who in 20 years had gone from homeless to River Oaks, and yet, I also felt guilty. From this neighborhood, we inherited an unsettling privilege, resting on a legacy of exclusion. I also felt guilty about feeling guilty. It was only through an education that my parents had sacrificed to give me that I had learned the history of this community.

“Where are you from, Hannah?”

My voice always catches, unable to answer.

It is not easy to call this place home. As the only nonwhite family on our street, there was an unspoken pressure to blend in. My parents lectured: we were never to speak Chinese outside, we were to dress respectfully, we would be polite to neighbors, we would not act cheap. There were two versions of me, the one at home and the one made American and presentable. I didn't go trick-or-treating again, but, all those years later, I had a new costume.