

Familiarity Breeds Mayhem

By RICHARD ELMAN

IHAVE been living about a dozen years on Long Island and almost every day when I read the papers somebody is murdered by somebody else, a friend, a neighbor, often a close relative.

These killings are very different from the murders I used to read about when I lived in Manhattan. Many of those were crime-related, or the so-called crimes of passion of the so-called underclasses, or an occasional Park Avenue disembowelment.

Here on the Island, close family values often lead to murder. A father molests his daughter sexually and she puts a contract out on him. Never a thought of leaving home. As a good friend says, "Here they do it as a way of getting personal, with .22's and rototillers."

It's also usually the case that the murders I've read about since moving here all have that solidly middle

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class or blue-collar character of tuna wiggles on toast: husbands killing wives after a Christmas Eve seafood dinner; wives picking up guys at their health club and asking them to do in their husbands; parents murdered in the master bedroom by an angry teen-age child as they are watching "Masterpiece Theater."

Often the more brutal the behavior, the more suburban the environment. Teen-age rape-murder in Setauket Harbor, devil worship in Northport, strangulation in Valley Stream. An awful carnage seems to be taking place behind trimmed lawns on quiet streets.

This has led me to believe that if I don't really care to know most of my Long Island neighbors, the feeling should be mutual.

A lot of us have murder in our

ment and rehabilitation, I can surmise. Nevertheless, I am still jittery whenever this young man reappears in our neighborhood for a visit with his family, and when I bump into his cohort at the checkout counter of the supermarket I forfeit my breath to the furious pumping of my heart.

It seems pretty clear that a lot of folks have very bad tempers, as my mother used to say, and they may be thinking about you even though you don't think about them. You wouldn't want to cross them when they are mowing the lawn, or making a frustrated request for the family car.

Is it because they are so desensitized by the violence they see on television? Is that why cars race down Christian Avenue oblivious to pedestrian traffic as though they were on a freeway? Is that why a neighbor's son was chased by a pickup truck when he and a friend drove out for ice cream on a warm spring night, and when the two boys panicked their chasers persisted until the boys smashed themselves against a telephone pole and one of them died?

Why are so many of my neighbors so preoccupied with personal redemption? Are they bored? So incapable of superficial pleasures? Without forgiving my own acts of rage, I would suggest this yearning to be transformed or reborn is a rejection of life.

Many people fail to appreciate hypocrisy and are unable to acknowledge its benign effects on human relations. Two-faced people do not kill. They turn away and smirk, and go about their secretive business as subtle detractors, practitioners of gossip and backbite and sin.

But some people, alas, truly feel when they are in a murderous rage they are being true to the only feelings they can recognize as their own, and the result is often onslaught.

Such people regard entertaining contradictory impulses as being a poor host. To imagine yourself a hypocrite goes against the fundamental machismo of our nation, which is that if you are aggrieved, or think you

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Long Island neighbors, the feeling should be mutual.

A lot of us have murder in our hearts a few hours out of every waking day but, whereas I write fiction to dispel my monsters, they join gun clubs and drive around armed as though on patrol in Belfast or Beirut. Somebody is accused of murder and the neighbors throw stones at his windows.

As I walk down Christian Avenue in Stony Brook I find myself wondering which of the old landmark houses I pass will be the next forcing bed of sudden violence. That man trimming his privet hedges with long-handled clippers; will he suddenly race inside for a drink of water and when his wife says, "Why don't you wipe your feet?" will he sever her parts from her body as though she were one of Frank Perdue's chickens?

Some years back, when my dearest friend was out of town, his house was robbed and vandalized by the child of a near neighbor. It was a shock to his wife and himself that anybody they hardly thought about could hate them that much.

Along with the theft, pictures were hacked with a bayonet, a musical instrument broken into little bits, swastikas scratched onto the sills, eggs splattered about and records removed from their albums and thrown willy-nilly on his front lawn in a psychotic tantrum.

The intruders knew them as people and, recklessly, they thought of them as people they wanted to hurt. When they were apprehended they said they were just drunk. They were also engaging in terrorist activity.

Many years have passed since that crime, and there has been punish-

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have cause to be, then the sincere thing is to strike back.

We claim a great deal for sincerity; it permitted us to murder Vietnamese, and our own sons, while portraying the Viet Cong as deceitful manipulators. It will permit us to kill a lot of the Colombian and our own underclasses in a "war" against drugs.

It's precisely because everybody believes in their own just wars that there's such a need for dissemblers.

But in practice what should this mean for the potentially murderous suburbanite? It means behave yourselves, it means always back away from confrontation. Act nice. If you wake up feeling like you could kill somebody, go fishing. Leave people alone. You are a lethal weapon.

Civilized people have always valued dissimulation as the glue that holds societies together. That is why we punish behavior, not thoughts, and why we are free to read and speculate on whatever moves us, but not permitted to enact our fantasies willy-nilly except, in certain cases, with other consenting adults.

I am now 55; I've known love, seen war, experienced intimacy and bliss. It's been my experience that among the most pleasurable forms of communal interaction is to remain civilly indifferent to others, as good works often lead to self-righteousness and then to indignation, and reproaches never help anybody to feel better about anything. Since familiarity too often breeds contempt, let's all try to remain strangers out here. The life you save may be your own.

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