

Jacob M. Appel
Right-of-Way

What to call the street where I grew up—six blocks of one-way asphalt connecting Van Buren Avenue to Burlingame Parkway—never troubled us until the spring of my thirteenth birthday, when somebody pilfered all twelve signs that identified the thoroughfare as Rabbit Meadow Lane. These signs, identical cast aluminum fixtures attached to their posts with screws and washers, dated from the early 1950s, and they vanished on the same foggy Sunday night in April, leaving in their wake the orphaned tags belonging to the intersecting cross streets. Why our bandit hadn't pinched these signs as well remained a mystery—as did why someone would want twelve identical street signs in the first place—but the resulting conflict pitted neighbor against neighbor and undermined the quiet civility that had long reigned over our upper-middle class corner of Creve Coeur.

I don't mean to suggest that the inhabitants of Rabbit Meadow Lane had ever formed a tight-knit community. We had not. But the physicians and university professors and insurance executives—like my own father—who'd revitalized the patchwork of blocks behind the municipal courthouse in the 1980s, transforming rundown tenements into refurbished townhouses, belonged to that dying breed of Rockefeller Republicans who pruned their own hedges, kept their sidewalks free from ice, hand-delivered misdirected mail promptly, and minded their own damn business. Or at least told themselves that they did. They'd created “a suburb within a city,” my father boasted, and during his three terms representing our district on the Board of Aldermen, he sponsored legislation to create an independent “Village of Rabbit Meadow” beyond Creve Coeur's taxation authority. That may explain my old man's outrage when, shortly after the Great Sign Robbery, a librarian named Bernard Pozner circulated a petition to change the name of our street.

“Leo Lippitt isn't going to look the other way,” warned my father at breakfast one Sunday, referring to himself in the third person—a sure indication that he was upset. “So there aren't any rabbits. It's not like we're advertising a pet store. Tell me, Ellen. Is there still a wall on Wall Street?”

My mother continued feeding Gerber apple puree to my baby sister. “It *is* kind of funny, you know. We've lived here how many years? And never once did I pause to ask: Why is our street named after rabbits, if there aren't any?”

“Jesus, Ellen. Whose side are you on?”

“I suppose there must have been rabbits *once*,” mused my mother. “When do you think the rabbits last lived here?”

“How the hell should I know?” My father pushed his chair away from the table and paced across the linoleum. “I could be more sympathetic if the name were offensive or confusing—if it belonged to a colonial slave trader or if we lived on Jefferson Davis Terrace. Although changing would *still* be inconvenient. But *rabbits*? Leo Lippitt isn't going to let himself be branded a racist for defending rabbits.”

Pozner apparently hoped to rename the street after Algernon McFlythe, an African-American poet who'd been born at #15 before World War I. The librarian had been going door

to door, claiming the missing signs offered the perfect opportunity for “progress,” and distributing mimeographed samples of McFlythe’s verse.

“I tell you what, Ellen,” said my father. “Joshua and his dad are going to pay a visit to the Pozner residence this morning. What do you say to that, Joshua? Are you ready to stand up for Rabbit Meadow?”

“I don’t feel well,” I lied. “My head hurts.”

Bernard Pozner’s daughter, Priscilla, was two grades ahead of me at Hutchinson High School, a weird, tomboyish creature whom I dreamed of marrying. The last thing on earth I wanted was to show up at her house with my father.

“Nothing cures a headache like fresh air. Unless you have a brain tumor.” My old man winked at me. Then he retrieved his sweater from the hook behind the door. I secretly hoped that I *would* contract a brain tumor—at least, a benign one—just to serve him right. “Anyway, it’s not as though McFlythe lives here anymore either, no more than the rabbits do. I read some of his poems, by the way. Very bleak stuff. I tried to keep an open mind, but the truth is I found them rather tedious.”

“Please don’t cause trouble, Leo,” admonished my mother. “If you die of a heart attack, nobody will care what the street is called.”

“Nobody’s causing trouble. We’re just paying a neighborly visit,” said my father. “Now if your son would stop lollygagging and help clear the table....”

Although the Pozners lived only six blocks away—at the very base of our street, just off the corner from Van Buren—my father preferred to cover the short distance at the wheel of his Oldsmobile. He was a skilled driver, but an aggressive one, especially when angry, and he rolled through each of the four-way stops. Twice, he cut off vehicles from the cross streets as they sought to exercise the right of way. By the time we pulled up in front of the Pozners’ residence five minutes later—a tidy brick structure with geranium boxes tucked below the dormer windows—I’d grown carsick and pale with terror.

We passed through the wrought-iron swinging gate. My father placed his hand on my shoulder and observed, “Always meet your adversary face to face. One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned in life is that a pair of reasonable men can resolve almost any disagreement with twenty minutes of honest conversation.” He grinned and added, “Women, I’m afraid, are another matter entirely.” Then he pressed the buzzer, and in a moment, we stood face to face with Bernard Pozner.

The librarian turned out to be a short, slight-framed man with a chevron moustache who looked a generation older than my parents. After my father introduced us, referring to me as his “progeny,” Pozner led the way into a cluttered parlor off the foyer. Commemorative posters blanketed the walls, honoring Harriet Tubman and the Scottsboro Boys and the National American Woman Suffrage Association. A picket sign, resting against the coffee table, demanded an immediate nuclear freeze. Atop the baby-grand piano, assorted photographs depicted a heavyset, soft-featured woman whom I later discovered to be the librarian’s late wife—Priscilla’s dead mother—killed ten years earlier in a collision at a railroad crossing. Mercifully, there was no trace of Priscilla herself. Pozner steered us toward a damask sofa and settled into a matching armchair.