

# Born in the 'Burbs

*An intrepid suburban mom wonders if home sweet home really is just beyond the next development.*

I GREW UP in the suburbs of Portland in the late 1960s, back when the city was just beginning to reach tentative fingers into rural locales with exotic names like Beaverton, Tigard and Metzger. My best friend lived next door in a daylight ranch with four brothers, a black lab and her impossibly groovy parents. We called them the Brady Bunch. My family, being far more musical, were the Partridges. Mom was even prone to burst into impromptu musical theater numbers while we barreled through the streets of Beaverton in our canary-yellow station wagon.

Every night, the neighborhood kids would gather at the top of my street astride Big Wheels and Stingrays to burn a path down the freshly paved asphalt, past freshly minted street signs and freshly shingled homes, into the sunset.

But somehow I never felt quite as perfect as my surroundings. My bangs were always crooked; instead of shaking a tambourine like Shirley Partridge, my mom shook a martini; and I spent my evenings fantasizing about living in a mud hut in deepest Africa—anywhere but the 'burbs. I often imagined that my neighbors, upon learning this terrible truth about me, would point at me and scream, as though I were one of the pod people from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, at which point the smooth asphalt would pucker and swell beneath my Keds, rise in a tar-coated, lavalike ooze, and then spit me forth like the boil on the ass of the suburbs that I truly was.

Yeah, I was an odd kid.

Which is why, when I grew up and married my equally unconventional suburban sweetheart, we couldn't wait to escape.

In 1986, yearning for the diversity, stimulation and anonymity of the city, we chose an apartment five minutes from Portland's city center. My husband worked for a theater company on a stretch of NW Couch

Street that was affectionately referred to by locals as Needle Alley. I worked at a now-defunct business college in the Pittock Block and enjoyed an office overlooking a quaint commons known as Needle Park, owing to the contingent of tar-heroin addicts who recreated there. Like a pack of junkie Easter Bunnies, each night they'd leave hypodermic needles for us to find the next morning.

At first my husband and I, being young and fearless, were determined to fully embrace the seamy side of Portland. But as the 1980s came to a close, we decided to start a family, and cringed at the prospect of raising a child in the city. We imagined little Billy playing Hypodermic Needle Hopscotch or Hobo Hide-and-Seek. We had to face it: We were suburban babes at heart, and while we could play the part of savvy and "street," deep down, we were neither. Beneath our bravado, the Big City

paralyzed us, and so there came a day when we couldn't flee fast enough.

In the fall of 1988, we settled into the hippie burg of Multnomah Village. While technically the suburbs, the Village was host to a thriving artistic community boasting antique shops and galleries overflowing with stained glass and pottery. With all of this only five minutes from downtown, it seemed an idyllic place to feather our nest. We'd found our nirvana.

Then we met... the Neighbors.

The owners of the quaint bungalow across the street turned up one day to welcome us with a jar of homemade "jam" that looked suspiciously like a jar of vomit. Introducing himself as an ex-airline pilot, the man of the house launched headlong into the sordid story of his forced retirement. Apparently the airlines frowned upon mixing martinis with high altitudes. Who knew?



The woman beside the pilot was 50-ish and statuesque, with leathery skin the color of chewing tobacco. Tall, blond and reeking of grain alcohol, she pumped my outstretched hand. “Goddag, I am Birgit,” she slurred in an accent that sounded indigenous to some cold Nordic country.

Feeling certain I’d misunderstood her, I asked for clarification: “Did you say your name is *Beer-gut*?”

“Ya, I’m from the Netherlands,” Birgit added by way of explanation. Following several unladylike belches, she then invited us over for cocktails. Naturally.

After we declined the invitation, the twosome staggered back to the bungalow, where the pilot deposited Birgit, ass first, into a kiddie pool in the front yard. I watched her head loll to the side as she promptly rolled out of the pool and passed out next to the flower beds. Potted geraniums—*potted Birgit*.

Over the next six months, as we fostered our own suburban lives, we kept our distance from the pilot and his princess. We continued to decline their party invi-

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tations, all of which seemed to revolve around vodka, Abba music and the wading pool. Then on our first Thanksgiving in our new home, the love-in came to an end.

As I rolled my bird out of the oven, the EMTs rolled Birgit out of the bungalow in a body bag. She had finally gone to the great wading pool in the sky.

We’d returned to the suburbs to escape the twisted depravity of urban street life, only to replace it with the pathos and depression of a suburban nightmare. Where were the Stingrays and perfect sunsets? Where were Carol Brady and Shirley Partridge now that we really needed them? Hell, I’d even have settled for Weezy Jefferson! At least Weezy had the sense to “move on up to the East Side, to a deluxe apartment in the sky”... hello?

Three months later we’d settled into a new home in the bowels of Tanasbourne. A once-booming agricultural community, Tanasbourne, like the rest of Portland, had grown up. It was now a mini-mall-dotted expanse of suburbia boasting top-quality schools and a Target store three miles wide. We’d finally found our “safe haven” in a 250-home development.

I knew the minute I met my well-toned, fashionably coiffed neighbors that I didn’t

fit in. They made the Stepford Wives look like an indolent bunch of slackers. They kept their homes showroom-ready and organized their schedules with the military precision of a West Point cadet. Meanwhile, I lurched through my days barely managing to sling mac and cheese onto the table before falling face-first into the mattress (shamefully covered in sheets boasting no higher than a 200 thread count).

Sure, I made futile attempts to conform. I enrolled my three boys in the right preschool, purchased a Dodge minivan and joined the PTA. This, however, was just a mask I wore to keep the neighbors from feeling nervous and twitchy around me.

But the mask was bound to crack.

And it did, one afternoon when, upon being invited to my umpteenth home-shopping party (a suburban ritual I'd avoided for years), I met a neighbor who wouldn't take no for an answer.

She stood on my porch in her perky Nike tennis skirt, her collagen-injected lips puckered obscenely into a forlorn pout.

She wanted an answer, and I was about to give her a doozy.

Smiling politely, I replied, "Oh, I can't attend those parties. I tend to get really, *really* drunk."

With a snap of her OPI Bitch Red nails, she volleyed back, "That's OK, we never serve alcohol." I could see she was a worthy opponent. I needed to up the ante. It was time to let my freak flag fly.

"Oh, I always bring my own flask," I quickly countered. "You'd never know until it's too late and I'm belting out Ethel Merman tunes. Of course, *if* I attend, you might want to cover the furniture, as I tend to be a projectile vomiter." By the time the words were out of my mouth, my neighbor was making a dash for the sidewalk, her Jimmy Choo sandals clacking as she ran.

It was only at that moment, with sudden crystalline clarity, that I realized suburbia *needed* me. I had become the Birgit of Tanasbourne, the Birgit whose role in life is to inject a little dash of anarchy into the order, a little Abba into the neighbors' muzak. The Birgit who would keep suburbia sprawling, the badly behaved neighbor inspiring others to move farther away just to escape me.

But when searching for nirvana just beyond the next development, I'd advise them to check their real motivations. Because no matter how perfectly clipped the hedges or smooth the driveways, one thing the suburbs won't ever help you avoid is your true nature.

I am Birgit. And unfortunately for the neighbors, I am here to stay. ♪