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5 The church of their childhood was gone, the white clapboard church with the steeply pitched roof and the abbreviated spire. It had been replaced by a much costlier building, monumental in style though modest in scale, with a crenellated Norman bell tower at one corner and a rose window above the massy entrance. Someone whose historical notions were sufficiently addled might imagine that centuries of plunder and dilapidation had left this last sturdy remnant of grandeur, that the bell tower might have sunk a dozen feet into the ground as ages passed. The building was reconsidered once or twice as money ran out, but the basic effect answered their hopes, more or less. "Anglicanism!" her father had said, when he saw the plans. "Utter capitulation!" His objections startled the elders, but did not interest them particularly, so they drew discreet conclusions about his mental state. Nothing is more glaringly obvious than discretion of that kind, since it
10 assumes impaired sensitivity in the one whose feelings it would spare. "As if I were a child!" her father said more than once, when the decorous turmoil of his soul happened to erupt at the dinner table.

This was a grief his children had never anticipated. Nor had they imagined that their father's body could become a burden to him, and an embarrassment, too. He was sure his feebleness inspired condescensions of every kind, and he was alert for them, eager to show that nothing got past him, furious on slight pretexts. The
15 seven of them telephoned back and forth daily for months. He was in graver pain than he was accustomed to, and his dear old wife was failing. He was not himself. Ames sat with him for hours and hours, though even he was not above suspicion. They pooled strategies for softening the inevitable blow of his retirement, which would have been a mercy if it had come about under other circumstances. Ah well. He came back to himself, finally, reconciled to loss and sorrow and waiting on the Lord. Now Glory was the family emissary. At
20 holidays they went as a delegation, there to signal reconciliation not quite so complete as to induce her father to struggle up those stone steps. The no longer new pastor was youngish, plump, smiling. His admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr brought him to the brink of plagiarism now and then, but he meant well. She was always the object of his special cordiality, which irritated her.

For her, church was an airy white room with tall windows looking out on God's good world, with God's
25 good sunlight pouring in through those windows and falling across the pulpit where her father stood, straight and strong, parsing the broken heart of humankind and praising the loving heart of Christ. That was church. She put Jack's ten-dollar bill in the drawer where they had always kept cash for household expenses. Every week someone from the bank came by with an envelope. She noticed that the amount it contained had gone from fifty dollars to seventy-five. Another telephone call. Even fifty dollars was never needed. When the
30 week was over, she put whatever remained in the piano bench, for no particular reason except that her father's arrangements were no business of hers, and the cash drawer would overflow if she didn't put the excess somewhere else. She put Jack's ten dollars in an envelope of its own. That he had had it ready must have meant that he had decided how much he could spare. That he had given it to her—well, he always did act as though the house was not quite his, nor the family, for that matter. There was a gravity in the gesture, in the
35 fact that he had intended it for hours or days before he had made it, and that he must have known the amount could not have mattered to anyone but him and yet pride had required him to give it to her. There was an innocence about it all. She felt she should be careful not to spend that bill as if it were simply ordinary money.

Every day Jack waited for the mail. However else he might while away his time, he was always
40 somewhere near the mailbox when it came, the first to look through it, though it seemed none of it was ever for him, except once, three days after he arrived. It was his birthday, which she had forgotten. There were six cards for him, from the brothers and sisters. He opened one and glanced at it and left it with the others, which he did not open, on the table in the hallway.

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"Teddy," he said. "He's glad I'm here. He's looking forward to Christmas."

45 "Teddy's glad I'm here, too," she said. "They all are."

He laughed. Then he asked, "Is it so bad for you, being here?"

"Let's just say it isn't what I had in mind."

"Well," he said, "poor kid."

50 That was brotherly, she thought, pleasing in a way, though it came at the cost of allusion to her own situation, which she always preferred to avoid. What did he know about it? Papa must have told him something. She resented the condescension in "poor kid". But brothers condescend to their sisters. It is a sign of affection.

Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, Virago Press, London, 2008. pp. 51-53.

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[...] My favourite passage in the whole book is Jacobs's account of a day in the life of her local newsagent. "One ordinary morning last winter, Mr Jaffe, whose formal business name is Bernie, and his wife, whose formal business name is Ann, supervised the small children crossing at the corner on the way to PS 41, as Bernie always does because he sees the need; lent an umbrella to one customer and a dollar to another ...
 5 gave out information on the range of rents in the neighbourhood to an apartment seeker; listened to a tale of domestic difficulty and offered reassurance; told some rowdies they could not come in unless they behaved and then defined (and got) good behaviour ... advised a mother who came for a birthday present not to get the ship-model kit because another child going to the same birthday party was giving that ..."

The chronicle goes on for more than half a page, too long to quote in full, and we get a sense here of the
 10 pleasure that Jacobs probably would have taken from writing fiction. It reads like Dickens – in the omniscient warmth and precision of the prose, and in the sense of a whole city crammed into one shop. And also in the character of Bernie, who seems to be almost supernaturally benign, after the fashion of so many Dickens characters. (In any modern novel, he would have to beat Ann with that umbrella.) Finally, it's like Dickens in the magnitude of the disparity between Jacobs's urban experience and our own, which is so great
 15 that it would be easier to believe she was writing about 1861 than 1961. When I used to live in Bethnal Green, I felt a tender appreciation for the unjudgmental 24-hour shop near my flat, but then I wasn't about to ask for a loan or wail about my ex-girlfriend. As Sharon Zukin argues in her recent book *Naked City*, "Jacobs romanticised social conditions that were already becoming obsolete by the time she wrote about them."

But that doesn't detract from the usefulness of Bernie when he's reconsidered as a lesson in writing.
 20 "The social structure of pavement life hangs partly on what can be called self-appointed public characters," Jacobs writes. She is not – of course – employing the term "character" here in the literary sense, but for our purposes she might as well be. Nearly all novelists will have learned to make use of "public characters": secondary figures who can plausibly appear in almost any part of the book, who have good reasons for
 25 making those appearances, and who can therefore help to knit together all the curly fibres of a slightly disorganised narrative. Plenty of the requirements Jacobs sets out for building a healthy and diverse urban community can be applied with real success to building a vivid and plausible fictional community. *Death and Life*, in other words, is a sort of accidental creative writing textbook – perhaps appropriately so, because Jacobs's beloved West Village was itself full of writers. Early on, Jacobs says: "Under the seeming disorder
 30 of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of pavement use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance." But the art form of the city is not really dance. The art form of the city, described so well in that passage, is the
 35 novel. A word is hovering on the perimeter of this article, and that word is modernism. Jacobs was strongly against the modernist planning of Le Corbusier and Robert Moses; but on the other hand, a list of the older books that exemplify the lessons of *Death and Life* could include *Ulysses*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *Petersburg*, *Manhattan Transfer* and *Mrs Dalloway* – some of the skyscrapers of modernist literature. Everyone knows that modernism can mean different things at different times and in different fields, but
 40 Jacobs helps us to see with great clarity that all writers of fiction, consciously or unconsciously, stand – in one sense at least – in opposition to the modernism of the mid-century city planners. Fiction, after all, is about human difference, and Le Corbusier's futuristic *Ville Contemporaine* demanded a population as interchangeable as pachinko balls. (Barthelme, whose father was a modernist architect, spoke of Le

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Corbusier's "not insignificant totalitarian bent".)

45 For Jacobs herself, the novelist who most convincingly defied Le Corbusier was ... perhaps you can guess. "Gradgrind would have loved Le Corbusier's much later definition of a house as a machine for living," she wrote in an essay on *Hard Times*. "An enthusiastic Gradgrind had already made himself mentally and morally at home in a future where departments of planning would devote themselves to deliberately making the built environments of cities, towns and suburbs monotonous in the name of virtue – the kind of

50 result to which Dickens thought that worship of the eminently practical was pointing."
Dickens, of course, never met Le Corbusier – but James Joyce did. In 1922, the two men were both in Paris completing the works that would define them: *Ulysses* and the plan for *la Ville Contemporaine*. Fifteen years later, when they were at last introduced, they should have had a lot to argue about. In fact, they discussed only the novelist's two new parakeets, Pierre and Pipi. Soon afterwards, Le Corbusier wrote that

55 *Ulysses* was "a grand discovery of life", and drew parallels between Joyce's work and his own.
Le Corbusier had a hostility to the messy urban street so violent that, the architect Michael Sorkin suggests, it "can only be explained by psychoanalysis", and yet most of *Ulysses* takes place on these streets. As with *Bleak House*, one struggles to imagine a version of *Ulysses* set in *la Ville Contemporaine*, in which Leopold Bloom does not stroll from Sandycove to Phoenix Park to Eccles Street but rather takes an electric

60 lift from floor to floor of a self-contained 600ft-skyscraper, meeting no one and seeing nothing. That, however, is a close approximation to the natural state of any new fictional universe, before the novelist has variegated and populated it. The two duties are complex, and as Barthelme shows in *I Bought a Little City*, playing god isn't always easy. But you couldn't hope for a better tutor than Jane Jacobs.

Ned Beaman, "Rereading the Death and Life of Great American Cities" by Jane Jacobs. *The Guardian*, October 2011.

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Photograph by Stephen SOMERSTEIN. *Marching For Freedom Selma to Montgomery*. March 12-April 25 2015. Exhibition at MODERNISM gallery

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking to crowd of 25,000 at end of march Montgomery, Alabama March 25, 1965. gelatin silver print. 16 x 20 inches, edition: 25.