

# The New York Times

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Published: October 8, 2006

I think I'm the only black person living in my South Carolina neighborhood of 1,100 residences. If there are others besides me, I haven't seen them. I certainly have looked.

I didn't think I cared who lived in this gated community, though I took note of its unfortunate name: River Hills Plantation. I moved here because it's just outside Charlotte, N.C., where I lived in my younger days and still maintain friendships. I was looking for peace and quiet in my middle age, and when I saw this place, I fell in love with it. But a few months after moving in last year, I found myself longing to share kinky-hair stories. One day I was walking on one of the paths headed for the lake when I thought I saw a black woman up ahead, walking toward me. I didn't trust my eyes. I had been fooled several times by one of my white neighbors glistening after a recent vacation in Wilmington or Myrtle Beach. On this morning, as the woman walked closer and closer, I squinted. She had a light cocoa complexion. Was it real? Her hair was short. Was that an Afro? Just as she passed me, I nearly grabbed her, stuttering, "Excuse me, are you a person of color?" I was immediately sorry. Who talks like this?

She laughed and turned around.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I've been walking these paths for two months, and I've never seen a -- "

"Black person," she said.

"Yeah." I held out my hand. "I'm Patrice. Do you live here?"

"No, close by. But I've been walking this neighborhood to see if I like it," she said. "I'm thinking of buying."

I transformed myself into a real estate agent. "I just moved here from Washington, D.C. I have a two-story condo; three bedrooms, two and a half baths. They also have one-level and three-level units." I led her the short way back toward my house. "I live right here. Just knock and I'll show it to you. What time do you walk? Maybe we can walk together. My neighbor's house, the one on the end, is for sale now." On another day soon after that, we walked together. I nearly ran to keep up with her as she explained she was a trainer. I showed her my condo, she said she loved it and then I never heard from her.

I had a friend, a black man who lives in Mexico, visiting me at the time, and I told him: "Guess what? I saw a black woman on the walking path."

"So what?" he asked.

"So I've never seen another black person here."

"Do you have to have another black person in the neighborhood?"

I resented the question and the tone. "I didn't say I had to have another one. I just said I had never seen another one."

Meanwhile, I had begun making friends with my next-door neighbor. The first day I drove up to my house, she came out to meet me. "You're not going to believe this," the woman said. "We're George and Martha."

"Don't tell me. . .," I replied.

"No, not Washington," she said, laughing. "Radzynski."

"Phew," I sighed.

It was a brief exchange, but by the next day Martha was at my front door with an offer to introduce me to the library, the dump, a notable writer who sold vegetables from her farm and the best thrift and antique shops around. It turns out that Martha and I were born a month apart. We have the same sense of humor. We like the same books.

A month ago, I looked out my window and saw the woman with the Afro fast-walking right by my house. I admit to being a little miffed that the only other black woman I've seen has dissed me. It's irritating to be ignored by anybody, but especially by someone with whom I thought I shared a vernacular. Miss Fast Walker helped me come to terms with the idea that I may not find such a relationship here.

I've wondered, since my decision to move here in the first place, whether I am different from most black people. I certainly couldn't have lived here 20 years ago, not because I wouldn't have been allowed to but because I thought my black neighborhood defined who I was. And I guess my desire for at least one black friend here was a last vestige of that old belief. I still feel I'm not supposed to be happy surrounded by white people, living on a "plantation."

But I've come to cherish what I have: the trees, the lake, the walking paths and a good friend. It's not so bad to sit out on the patio with Martha, sip our evening cocktails and guess at why we were born beautiful instead of wealthy.

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