

Part One: The Place

My family moved into the little house where my memories begin in 1968, before I was two years old. The house was built in 1948, when soldiers who had served in World War II were back and wanting homes to start their families in. Many of the soldiers returning to Detroit were young Black men, and many of the white people in Detroit protested against any housing for Black people being built in their communities. In 1948, there were no fair housing laws, so the white people got their way. This little house was built in a white neighborhood. New homes for Black families were built elsewhere. One such community was a couple of miles away, behind a thick concrete wall.



The house was so little that an adult could walk from the front door to the back in about ten steps. Walking in the front door put you right in the living room, where we had our sofa, an end table with a lamp, a tv that stood on four legs, and a small stereo in a cabinet. Before the evening news came on, while my mom made dinner in the kitchen, I would watch *The Friendly Giant* on the tv. If the weather wasn't right, our antenna didn't get the signal from Canada, and I couldn't see his show.



Straight across from the front door was the hallway with the doors to three bedrooms and a bathroom. One of the bedrooms was mine, just big enough for my bed and my dresser. Another one had my play table and toys in it, until my brother was born. Then we put some of those things in the basement and the rest in my room. I liked the quiet time my mom and I spent together while I took a bath. One evening she told me the baby was kicking, and she took my hand and I felt my little brother moving in her belly.



Most of the time my mom was in the kitchen. The kitchen was also just inside the front door and to the left. There was a place in there for a little dining table under a window that looked out the front of the house. At the back of the kitchen was a door and a step-down. At the step-down, you could go out the side door to the driveway, or go the other way down the basement stairs. In the basement was the washer and dryer where my mom washed our clothes, and also the workbench where my dad fixed things. The basement was dark and gray, and always cool or cold.

One summer day I was in the basement with my dad, asking him questions and telling him my ideas until he needed me to go upstairs so he could concentrate. Upstairs in the kitchen my mom was pitting cherries. She gave me one to eat. Maybe it was the first fresh cherry I ever ate, because to this day I vividly remember that when I bit down on it the flavor filled me so full that everything else in the world disappeared, and when that feeling was gone I wanted more. Mom remembers that I ate so many cherries that day that I got a stomachache.



Out the side door was the driveway where my dad parked the car when he was home. We didn't have a garage, and we only had one car. The driveway was also one of the places I often played with the boys next door. There were windows over the driveway in both houses, so our moms could keep an eye on us. One day when I thought I was ready I took Michael by the hand and planned to walk around the block with him. I knew that I wasn't allowed to cross any streets, and I wasn't allowed to go walking alone, but around the block with Michael followed those rules, so I figured everything would be okay as long as we got back before a mom noticed. I hadn't figured on not being able to count four corners, so after we turned the second one and the houses didn't look like I expected, I started to get worried. I decided that going forward was better than back, which might have worked out fine but the lady who lived behind our house recognized us and put us in her car to drive us back home. That was when I was really worried, because I knew we weren't supposed to get in a stranger's car. We got home safe and alive, but I was in a whole lot of trouble for going on that walk.



My parents tried to get me to understand “dangerous,” but my only real reference was cartoons and some of the news I saw after The Friendly Giant on the tv. I didn’t know that danger came in color, too. I didn’t know that when the house I was living in was built, a lot of white people decided that Black people had to live in other neighborhoods, behind concrete walls. I didn’t know that a lot of Black people were sick and tired of being told where they could and couldn’t go. But I would have understood that, because I already knew what it was like to have places you want to go and somebody saying no.



<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/06/detroit-riots-1967-protests#img-2>
White police arrest Black suspects on 12th Street, July 25, 1967

A lot of Black people in the city were angry about these things, and that anger scared a lot of white people. That anger had become rioting several times in recent years, and that scared my mom. We usually stayed in the neighborhood, or walked a few blocks to Seven Mile Road to do some shopping. I remember there was a Buster Brown store there, where I lied that the shiny black shoes didn't pinch my feet so that mom would buy them for me.

But one time my mom needed to buy a suitcase for my dad at the department store, so we waited at the bus stop to take the bus downtown. When the bus pulled up to the stop she clutched my hand and said "don't look at anybody, don't talk to anybody, and don't let go of my hand."

My brother was born in January 1970, and a year later my dad started a new job in another city, so we moved out of that little house. If it hadn't been that, we would have moved within a couple more years for some combination of needing and being able to afford more space, and the phenomenon known as "white flight." In 1968 new legislation had passed saying that white people couldn't refuse to sell a house to a Black person, and banks couldn't refuse to lend Black people money to buy houses. So Black people started moving into neighborhoods they hadn't been in before, and white people got scared or mad or both and moved out. Something like that happened in my neighborhood, I don't know exactly what or when, but just over three years after we moved away we drove past the little house and the windows were boarded over. I was seven years old and I knew that boarded over windows meant something bad, but my understanding of discrimination and oppression was almost non-existent. All I saw was that something was broken and now that little house was hurt.



Fast-forward 46 years. It's 2020, I'm an adult, a parent, at home, bored, in front of the computer, and I look up that house I last saw in 1974. There's the street view. It's still there. Still boarded up – or boarded up again I see as I select earlier street views. There is debris in the street in front of it. And there are listings. I see that the little house is property of the Detroit Land Bank, and was up for auction just days before. Anyone living in Detroit who could fix up the house within a few months could bid to buy it, for as little as \$1000. I don't live in Detroit, but I am transfixed. I scroll through the photos. There, in low-resolution, are the places my memories begin, but very different than in my memories.



The bathroom where I felt my baby brother moving before he was born.
The bathtub had been under the window.



The kitchen window where the neighbor Michael and I shared our third birthday party.



The kitchen counter where my mom pitted cherries, and the door to the step-down.



Here is my parents' bedroom



Here is the roof over what I think was my bedroom



Here is the front door, and the window that the tv sat in front of.



Here is the living room where I held my brother for the first time.

This house had visited my memories and dreams throughout my life. Now these images both confirmed and harshly conflicted with my memories. I do not know the stories of the others who lived in this house. I do know that the Detroit Land Bank owns thousands of homes in various states of distress.

The story of this house will continue in my second message next Wednesday.