



PHOTOS BY VANESSA

Mass was once a boulevard of fine Victorian homes and elm-lined streets; a trolley provided transport to downtown. Today it looks like a post-war scene from the Twilight Zone. Buildings are either boarded up or have been demolished by the city block. Years ago GM bought up all of the trolley cars and carved up neighborhoods with freeways running through them, despoiling communities. Then the riots of the 60's created a mass exodus from the inner city of job-holding residents, and Dutch Elm disease killed all the trees.

Detroit looked evacuated. "Burn politicians, rot garbage," was the first graffiti we saw. The next was a resigned, "Masturbate more."

The merged Universalist/Unitarian Church is a massive brick structure that turns out to be a 1892 Victorian mansion of many floors, ballroom included, that was donated to the church for use of service to the community by the original family who built the house. There is an ornately carved grand staircase, still much of the original furnishings, and lots of stained glass windows that now filter out the bleak exterior. Above the nursery entrance is the stained-glass portrait of the owner's daughter, blond, blue-eyed, killed tragically at the age of four. Her ghost has been seen during lockdowns. There is a commercial kitchen and several large rooms that have been added on for the daycare and church meetings. Next to the house is the sanctuary, a massive fortress of a room with a pipe organ covering one wall, from floor to ceiling. The church is the center where one can feel safe, where community care takes place by the concerned.

Sarah lives on the third floor in a partitioned arrangement that includes a kitchen, living area, bath, and three small bedrooms; this was the bedroom. We sat out where there was a makeshift patio on the slate roof and a panoramic view of the city. It was like being on the top of a fortress from the early Middle Ages. The tenants are in charge of lock-up. They ensure that every room of the castle is free from intruders. Few people pay rent in Detroit, she said. They barter security services for space.

From our eagle's nest the city skyline looked beautiful with generations of skyscraper architecture from the 20's to the RenCen. The Ren-

naissance Center was built not long ago to revitalize the downtown, bring everyone back. It was built next to about 23 empty skyscrapers. The gray glass and steel complex looks like a monument to the Incinerator with its smoke stack protrusion from the middle. Visible to the Canadians just across the river.

The Incinerator is Detroit's solution to finding fast cash, what a train was to Jesse James. The Incinerator burns 4,000 tons of trash a day, and the emissions coming out of the smoke stack are mercury, lead, cadmium, chromium, arsenic, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and deadly compounds like dioxin and furans. Toxic ash, which is the byproduct of incineration, cannot be disposed of without harming the environment and threatening the health of the residents. The airstream carries it north, to Canada; airspace is free. Deregulation is Detroit's business partner.

Sarah drove us around the neighborhood in her fast compact stationwagon. Houses were boarded-up, burnt out, razed, decaying. She showed us the rundown theater where Houdini died during his act and the rambling corner funeral home where he was embalmed. The Victorian Queen Anne is a home for squatters and looks like it is about to implode. We passed by the housing projects for those on General Assistance. Or, were; there is no more General Assistance, no welfare at all, so that housing is off limits. The grass is growing tall all over Detroit. No money has been invested in the city in years. It was robbed and left for dead.

We briefly swung through downtown in the early evening, Sarah identifying buildings and their vacant interiors. Only a few people were downtown. Even the Burger King was boarded up. Nervous about drive-by shootings, Sarah drove fast, made U-turns on major boulevards, and ran through red lights. It was like a dream of the post-holocaust world driving past the massive GM plant that once dominated the city. Now abandoned, its rusted, broken-windowed industrial buildings are protected by rolled barbed-wire fencing that catches strewn garbage from the broken and pitted highway. The bleak sight of abandoned industry stretched for miles, the shadow side of prosperity.

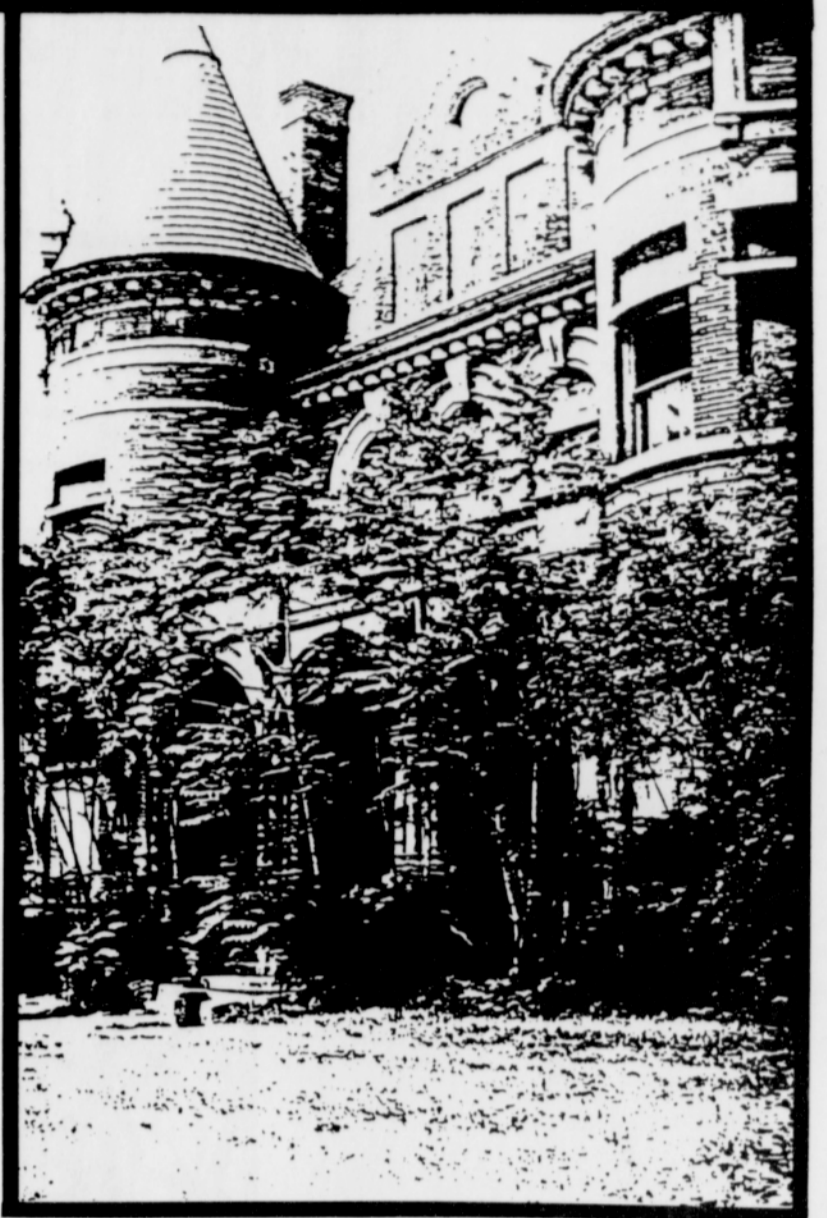
Vanessa, missing Oakland and her Mexican friends, wanted to see the Hispanic community. After driving through countless deserted neighborhoods we came upon a community of people spread over a couple of blocks, sitting on front porch steps, kids playing in the street. I watched a man mowing the pathetic lawn that was his yard. His home was dilapidated, the grass sparse, the neighborhood at the edge of a war zone, and he was pushing a lawnmower.

The only place to go out in Detroit is Greektown, a two- or three-block area that is heavily gentrified, lit up, and where there are people, lots of them; Japanese tourists, well-dressed internationals, people of all colors who obviously have jobs. We saw three policemen chatting with a guy in a madras shirt and boatshoes, and a great-looking gal. Sarah said their chief has just been sent to prison for embezzling millions from the city (and she said the city manager has a few mistresses whose wardrobes he buys with city funds, and a daughter in Beverly Hills whose home he keeps up with money from the same source). We ordered more food at the Greek restaurant than we could eat, so we walked out with our polystyrene containers, stopped at the Astoria Cafe for a canoli. The street was like the place "Down Under" in the film "A Boy and His Dog." Just after we left the lighted area a black man approached us asking for money. We handed over the food and Vanessa gave a dollar. Sarah said her friends sometimes cook up soup in corner lots for those who are left. We passed one such lot earlier, near the industrial area. A fire in a barrel outside a boarded-up building warmed a large pot, and a few folk were gathered for the sharing of sustenance.

It is not easy finding direction in Detroit; the maze of roads were designed by madmen. We came to a lot of deadends, road closed, and no entry signs in places that made us nervous. Not seeing people in a city is as scary as suddenly seeing someone. For me, this was the heart of darkness.

We drove past warehouses near the Mafia-controlled fruit market where artists have moved in, creating a small colony. If I were a brave film maker I would be there, too. The Fox Theater, gloriously lit in neon jewels glittering out into a desolate surrounding of empty boarded-up businesses and grass growing up through the sidewalks is one scene. No people, just lights in the darkness.

Sarah said that by the year 2000 Detroit will be green. The grass is pushing up everywhere, trees seeming to grow out of buildings. A couple of artists have decorated a two block section of empty houses. The tree trunk in front of a polka-dot house they painted is decorated with hundreds of old, broken children's toys; torsos, arms, legs, junk. In a vacant lot nearby piles of steel drums, old tires and broken furniture are gaily painted in whimsical patterns and colors. For the artist whose medium is residential houses by the block, Detroit is a paradise.



We had to take a circuitous route to get to a corner grocery store, still in business. It was heavily protected by iron grillwork. There was some debate about the risk of getting out for a sixpack, but we decided what the hell. This is a war zone. We got in and out pretty quick.

Sarah's boyfriend came over. He is a musician for a band called The Angry Red Planet and has lived in Detroit all his life. Sarah has, too. She works with street prostitutes in shelter, but the cut-off age is 21 and most of the prostitutes are older. All she can do is hand them condoms. After six months she is so discouraged she is planning to study music in Prague. She says she is always afraid in Detroit. It wasn't just me.

Vanessa took me to the airport the next morning. I insisted she get out, too. There was more to see, however, so she stayed and took photos of Henry Ford's neighborhood of crumbling castles and decaying manor houses. "Demolished by neglect" is the graffiti on one splendid home. Detroit has been demolished by desertion.

From Seattle I boarded a small plane to Portland that flew low and afforded a spectacular view of the Cascades. We passed close to Mt. St. Helens and still visible scars 12 years after the eruption. There is very little snow on any of the mountains, and the streams seem low. The devastation from the volcano looked miniscule compared to the vast clearcutting that reveals a skinned Earth. It looks like a serious skin disease all over the Pacific Northwest. I was hoping for some relief from how shocking post-industrialism is.

Sarah said emphatically, "Everyone has to look at Detroit. This is what it comes to when a community is destroyed." There are no gangs in Detroit; when the Rodney King verdict was heard, there was no response. There is no one there.

Karen Mellin is the director of the Clatsop County Women's Crisis Service. She lives in Astoria.



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