

Cassandra's Song

memories from motor city

by Merin McDivitt, Daily Arts Writer

Springfield Street, a short stretch of asphalt on Detroit's east side, used to have so many elm trees shading the road that Detroiters could barely see the sky as they drove on their way to the freeway. Passersby would stop for gas after work at Cliff's, or grab a snack for the road at the Bamboo Bar, and I imagine they'd stand there for a minute and watch the husky flecks of sun come down from the west and nearly stop cold over that dense canopy. In the summer, when the leaves got thick and bristly, the trees gave shade to kids biking and roller-skating down the pavement. The street sweepers would trim the branches so they stayed neat, twined together so it seemed like one long arch: a shadowy green tunnel with light at the end.

The trees were the first thing Cassandra Compton noticed when her family moved to Springfield from the north side.

"I can remember December 1954 like it was yesterday," she said, recalling all the stories she's told me.

To me, she's always been Dr. Montgomery, never Mel or Cassandra or even a Compton: a kind recreation director with a Ph.D. in medical anthropology. She became the director of Delray Recreation Center on the southwest side of Detroit the year after I began working there as a high school volunteer. I quickly got to know and love Dr. Montgomery as we worked side by side over the years. She cut her hair short last year, for the first time in a decade, and now it twists around her head like a halo. Dr. Montgomery is one of the smartest people I know, and one of the most caring. Her face is smooth and bright for her 66 years — wrinkle-free, except for a few smile lines around her eyes and mouth, and a line of worry stretched thin across her forehead.

While I was volunteering under her, she peppered our conversation with old anecdotes, and brought her childhood home back to life.

The city's present state is all I've ever known of it, and I love it as it is. In the five years I worked at the community center, I met enough wonderful people to pull me back there often, for Christmas parties and baptisms and the occasional quinceañera.

But Dr. Montgomery's love is so much stronger and more beautiful. It's not easy to love a place when you remember the light glinting at the western edge of that green tunnel of trees above 5572 Springfield St., and she tells me you can't bring yourself to drive by all that emptiness where you played, and learned to read and went on your first date. You can hold it in your hand and squeeze tightly, but it will just fall through like dust. I want to understand, at least a little bit, what it means to love something like that.

Detroit, the birthplace of the automotive industry and the heart of the American Arsenal of Democracy, hit a golden age coming off the second World War. Its population hit its all-time peak of 1.85 million in the 1950s, and the Big Three automakers — General Motors, Ford and Chrysler — fueled a growing middle class. However, labor disputes and racial tensions between white and Black workers — followed by energy crises, automation and imports — hurt employment in the region's largest industry.

The city would also suffer from severe racial tensions that came to a head in the summer of 1967 race riots, a product of segregation, unemployment and police brutality. It has been 62 Decembers since Montgomery's move to the east side.

"I am 66 years old," she said. "Let's put it that way, and you do the math."

November 1954 had been cold and clear, surprisingly sunny for a gray Detroit winter. But December made up for it with piles of thick wet snow, and while it must have turned instantly to lead-laced gasoline slush on the gray street below, up high in the elm trees it would've made a tunnel all the same, lacier and more delicate than the jungly summer canopy. On the days that hovered just above freezing, maybe it looked like a watery spider's web, one that would splatter you with chilly droplets when you walked underneath.

That was their new street, and even with the novelty of the tree tunnel, Cassandra and her older sister, Tywania, were not thrilled when Jimmy Compton Sr. packed up the family that December and moved across town to Springfield Street. Their dad worked for the Detroit Post Office, and he decided it was time for a different zip code. To make things even more difficult, they were the first Black family to move onto the street.

They missed their old brownstone, with bedrooms all upstairs; many years later they would recognize an almost identical home in the Huxtable's apartment in "The Cosby Show," and remember it fondly. They got used to their new house on Springfield Street, though, and the way she talks about her former neighborhood often makes me wish I had grown up there.

Cassandra was 4 then, but already everybody called her Mel. Her middle name is Melody, and the nickname stuck. She used to sing with her brothers and sisters while her mother played the piano.

"It rained 40 days, and it rained 40 nights; there wasn't no land nowhere in sight. God took a raven to bring the news, hoisted his wings and away he flew. To the East! To the West!"

Mel's sister would stand behind her and harmonize, "Didn't it fall, my Lord, didn't it rain!"

Mel still sings, in church concerts and on her own, and sometimes to me. Her rich voice fills the room, even if we are in the high-ceilinged gym of the community center. She hums melodies that have stuck in her mind long after her nickname slid off, songs that sweep me up in her nostalgia for a different time.

"It seemed like everything we wanted was close by, you know?" Mel said, her voice bright when describing her childhood home. "Big stores — there were still mom and pop stores. We could walk within a mile radius — I could go roller-skating; to a restaurant; I could do Christmas shopping; I could get donuts from the bakery; I could go to the movies; I could go swimming." These are things she can't do now because many of these businesses are now shuttered and the old residents now departed.

Dr. Montgomery talks about this time and place with such longing. The snow heaps up outside the coffee shop and I can close my eyes and see Springfield in summer: Head east out the front porch, turn right on Shoemaker Street and pass Betty's Sweet Shop, with model cars (all American, of course) and candy and a chrome-plated soda fountain just like in the movies. Round the corner again at Lemay, and there's Rinaldi's Supermarket. Frank's was across the street, and a restaurant with jukeboxes and cheap hamburgers, and those plush stools that kids can swirl around on until they start to feel sick.

Turn back for home and there on the corner of Shoemaker and Springfield was a big empty lot with some old billboards. "It was kind of hilly, and you'd play in the ice and the snow, or in the summer we went and would catch grasshoppers — you can't get me to go in tall grass now," Dr. Montgomery remembered with a chuckle. "I don't know how I did it back then. I was a kid. I was a tomboy."

Dr. Montgomery isn't the only one grasping at these old memories. So many of the people who live or work in Detroit today, and those who were raised in the city but moved away — Dr. Montgomery now lives mere miles from me in Washtenaw County — are nostalgically drawn to the glimmer of the old city, the splendor of its ballrooms and mansions and movie palaces. Publishers can't print enough books with titles such as: "Detroit: An American Autopsy," "Hidden History of Detroit," "Once in a Great City," "Detroit City is the Place to Be," and "Where Did Our Love Go?" There are more than 1,000 images tagged "Detroit Nostalgia" on Pinterest, entire Tumblr blogs and coffee table books and artists' careers dedicated to frayed black-and-white photographs. In them, older suburbanites lament their lost childhood homes and recite the litany

of forgotten city landmarks like well-worn rosary beads, like saying them over and again will bring them back to life: Hudson's Department Store, the streetcar, Vernor's Soda Fountain.

Even Berry Gordy, Motor City's prodigal son, returned to cash in on this thirst for nostalgia. Two years ago, I took the University of Michigan shuttle to see "Motown: The Musical," Gordy's version of the record label's rise, from Hitsville, U.S.A. to Hollywood. This was the nostalgic narrative, Motown the company as gentle and paternal, Motown the city as idyllic until the riots hit. I lapped it up. Gordy crammed the musical with every classic hit he still held the rights to, and, sitting there in the Fisher Theatre, surrounded by older ladies jamming to every song like it was 1965, I beamed for three hours straight.

It was nothing, though, compared to what the Comptons saw at the Motown Revues. Forget plain old nostalgia. If I too had been able to see The Jackson 5 and The Temptations in the same night — as Mel was able to multiple times while growing up — I'd be clawing at the door of the Fox Theatre like it was a time machine, begging to go back. In the 1960s, Motown would toss all its artists into one big show around Christmas-time. They would perform maybe four shows a day, one after the other, with a short break in between. Mel would stay for all of them.

"We got there in the morning, and they didn't clear out the Fox and say, 'Hey, you paid for this time, for another group.' You could stay. (Their wait brought them) Gladys Knight and the Pips, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and Tammi," Mel said, drawing out their names long and slow. "Tammi Terrell was beautiful. Those big pretty eyes, and the way she wore her bangs — they kind of had a little peak right there. Oh, she was beautiful."

Listening to my recording of our conversation, scratchy voices heard above the saxophone music of the coffee shop, something in Dr. Montgomery's tone struck me. I rewound a few seconds, "Oh, she was beautiful."

Dr. Montgomery's stories are all tinged with this soft quality of light, these infectious melodies that make me want to believe, to go back. "Sometimes when I'm talking to you, I hear music," she tells me. "I'd carry a transistor radio about as big as a box of cracker jacks. ... I'm walking home listening to Dee Clark singing 'Raindrops.'"

That glossy sheen never really wears off Dr. Montgomery's memories of this time.

There are nicks in the varnish, though, and they get bigger as we talk, as each year of Mel's childhood passes by with a quick step, as the grown-up world creeps in alongside the slow and

tedious decline of her neighborhood. Growing up in the first Black family on a Detroit street was not all jukeboxes and soda fountains.

"It was challenging," she said. "Our neighbors on either side of us were welcoming, but there were neighbors farther down that weren't so welcoming, and did some things that, you know ... weren't neighborly."

The kids made up other nicknames, too, these ones not particularly fond or funny.

"There was another lady, we called her 'Miss Hellcat-Raiser,' because she didn't like Blacks," Mel remembered. "Neither did her son. I don't know where we got that name from."

Other neighbors ignored Mel, pretending she didn't exist and refusing to move their spurting hose from the sidewalk to let her pass by on bicycles and roller skates. The shade of the canopy overhead could protect the Compton kids from the harsh sunlight, but there was little protection against a petty, agitated white neighborhood — a neighborhood whose local high school yearbook was titled "The Aryan" until a year or two before Mel enrolled there.

Then there was a neighbor who never had a nickname.

"There was this one gentleman that would not want to walk on the same side of the street with us," Mel said. "And if we did get too close with him, he'd take the collar of his coat and put it up to his face, and he'd turn to the side and spit on the ground."

And there were faceless neighbors too. Ones who came in the night and broke all their garage windows.

As bad as things could get on Springfield Street, they were nothing compared to the Compton's original home: Alabama. Mel was born in Birmingham, and her grandparents lived in an old company town built by the steel industry. Though she grew up in Detroit, the Comptons would visit Alabama when they could to catch up with family. She remembers the view

out the window seat of the Greyhound bus as it approached the city during the trips throughout her childhood — first, flat farmland, then, heavy industry on the outskirts and the hulking, slightly goofy silhouette of the huge steel Vulcan statue that welcomed them to Birmingham, glowing dark red while the sun set.

It wasn't much of a welcome. Grandma Larcena and Grandpa Mose kept the Compton kids occupied, but as Mel entered her teens, she started to notice things. She would sit on the stoop in her red majorette boots, which got so tattered by her marching that the heels wore off. Just down the way was a bar.

"To my right when I looked over my shoulder was 'Black Only,' and I looked over my shoulder to the left and it was 'White Only,' " Mel said, referring to the Jim Crow-imposed signs on public spaces in the South. She was a northern kid unfamiliar with this sort of legally codified discrimination, so she stared too long and too hard. "I was looking over there and they stared at me, like 'What are you doing?' " she remembered. "And they were hostile."

By the late 1950s and early '60s, the memory fades out.

"It seems like everything after that is blank," Dr. Montgomery said. "I don't know if we took the bus, or were they boycotting at the time? I don't remember, I don't remember. I just know when I saw that look on their faces, I can't remember anything after that."

Soon after, the trips faded too. The Compton's last visit down to Birmingham was in 1959. After that, some of the buses that went down stopped coming back up. The Freedom Riders took the Greyhound too, from Detroit and other cities in the North. Mr. Compton didn't want his children sitting next to these well-meaning kids who had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

"My dad was fearful of letting us," Dr. Montgomery said. "It was bittersweet. I felt a little resentful that year after year we couldn't visit

because of the civil unrest."

One of these buses sits in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute now — its hull, that is, charred and bare. Sometimes, people would set fire to the Greyhounds as they carried the Freedom Riders, idealistic students on a mission to register Black southerners to vote. Her father didn't want his children coming back up north the way 14-year-old Emmett Till did — in an open casket. Mel's mother sang for the True Rock Missionary Baptist Church on the east side; later, the family switched to the Lemay Avenue Baptist Church. Plunk these churches down in Birmingham, and Mel might've ended up like Denise McNair. Or Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins or Cynthia Wesley. That Birmingham church bombing, the notorious one in 1963, was the third such incident in 11 days in the city.

There is a dark side to our nostalgia — the memories that are hazy and gray, the things that Mel didn't understand well at the time and have since faded, fast. Yearning for the past also means a shared agreement that we will cast out the recollections that don't fit. Or perhaps agree that the present day is not better, but worse. That what lay at the end of the tunnel was not salvation.

The glumness of these memories casts a pall over the warm glow of Springfield Street. Still, Dr. Montgomery and I sail past them, perhaps too easily. Recollections are twisted like balloon animals into what we wish to see in them; words, those nimble acrobats, contort themselves around tricky subjects.

Consider a memory Dr. Montgomery shared a little earlier: the thinly veiled racial animus she received from some of her more distant white neighbors. Dr. Montgomery paused for a second, and then she wasn't Dr. Montgomery anymore. She was Mel. The gleam of Springfield Street, of that shining tunnel of tree canopies, would always win out over the foggy gloom of the bad days.

"But the trees," Mel pivoted. "The street sweepers would come, they'd trim the trees. I mean, it was just this beautiful archway that it looked like."

A Methodist pastor, Woody White, had moved across from the Comptons on Springfield Street and took them to church on East Grand Boulevard every Sunday. He encouraged the kids to do service, and Mel started getting involved in the church group.

"That was the most impactful time of my life — in the Methodist Youth Fellowship," Mel said. "(Reverend White is) a staunch, staunch advocate, to this day, for civil rights."

On June 23, 1963, he took the Compton kids to a civil rights march at Cobo Hall down by the river. Jimmy Sr. was across town representing his union in the march.

"I have a picture of my dad holding a picket sign that reads: 'President Lincoln freed the slaves, but did nothing for the Negroes. Free us!' " Mel remembered. "And for a long time, I didn't know what that meant."

This was no ordinary event. At the time, just a few months before the March on Washington, it was the biggest civil rights demonstration in American history. It drew a crowd of 125,000 people. Mel wore her best dress, and craned her neck to see, and Martin Luther King Jr. walked

up to the podium in Detroit. Organizers called this the Walk to Freedom; later, King would call it "one of the most wonderful things that has happened in America."

And King said this:

"I have a dream this afternoon that one day, one day little white children and little Negro children will be able to join hands as brothers and sisters. ... And with this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair. With this faith, I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows."

Later that summer, King would deliver an abridged version of this speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, overlooking more than 200,000 people on the National Mall. This, of course, would eclipse the Detroit march until it faded into nothing more than a footnote, an unlikely story told by wet-eyed grandparents. That September in Detroit, as schoolchildren prepared to return to class, a bomb detonated by members of the Ku Klux Klan would kill four little girls, blind an 11-year-old in her right eye, and injure 20 others. At the twilight of that decade, King was shot, riots racked Mack Avenue and Woodward as Mel took the bus home from a concert downtown, a war began in Vietnam and classmates lost their lives, those hostile and frightened white neighbors moved away and didn't come back. The decades passed, and Mel became Dr. Montgomery and moved away. The house on Springfield Street was torn down.

I want so badly to believe in just the happy stories — the snow globe city in Mel's memories. I think that's what Dr. Montgomery wants, too. She spins her stories around me faster and faster, it dizzies me and I imagine we pick up the globe and shake so hard. And the snow turns to leaded slush and ashes. And we are back in the desert, wandering; wandering.

This is all I can give you; it's all I have. Hold Springfield Street 1963 in your hand and hope it doesn't slip through like dust. And there is no five years later. No slumped, bloodied reverend, no sun-bleached balcony in Tennessee. No house-burning, fear-raising riots; no broken windows; and no concerts cut short by nearby looting. No for-sale signs or wood-paneled station wagons speeding to the east, to the west. No Devil's Night, no flames.

There is none of this.

Instead, Berry Gordy gets King to record some speeches at the label before the big day. He nearly jumps out of his socks when the good reverend instructs Gordy to donate all royalties to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King doesn't want a cent. Gordy never forgets.

Instead, Jimmy Compton Sr. gets up early like usual and marches with the postal workers' union. In a few years, Jimmy will be president of the union, bringing him plenty of trouble and a reputation as a hell-raiser. He will always stand for what is right, and raise the Compton kids to do the same. Jimmy steps down the asphalt in his old work boots and holds his sign aloft, gingerly, like it doesn't weigh more than an ounce.

And Mel wears her Sunday best, and strains to hear the reverend in the echoey hall, and what she does hear, she likes. Afterward they ride back home with Woody and Kim White, and pass under the tunnel of elms, leaves thick and checkered with sunlight in the late afternoon. And maybe on the other side, there is salvation.



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