

What Is To Be Done?
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I never intended to buy a house in Springfield. Wilbraham was out of range now that I was single again, but maybe Easthampton, Ware or even Montague? A nice rambling cape, I thought, with plenty of room for my stuff, and a garage for poor Sylvie, the vintage convertible who'd been confined to a dirt driveway alongside the duplex I'd been renting.

I never intended to buy the elegant old Victorian that caught my eye every time I flipped through the Multiple Listing Service listings. Just look at it to satisfy my curiosity, get it out of my mind, cross it off my list. What in the world were those soaring glass panels along the back of the house that looked like they belonged on the Ste.-Chapelle in Paris? And why was it so difficult to get a showing? How did these people expect to sell if no day was ever good for them? My curiosity grew and grew.

A showing, finally, and it was love at first sight. A magical little street, only a block long, that I never knew existed, although I'd been born and raised in Springfield. Brick sidewalks and those funky old-fashioned streetlights. Wide steps, a broad, inviting porch, imposing double doors. A foyer with parquet floors and a floating staircase twirling up three flights.

Through a French door, an elaborate mahogany and tile fireplace gleamed. Pocket doors separated front and back parlors with matching marble fireplaces, triple bay windows, ceiling medallions, and intricate, pressed-tin moldings. I was drooling before I ever saw the kitchen. But the kitchen! A jaw-dropping stained-glass window rose up 25 feet, and ran from front to back of the huge space. Light poured through the window and through skylights above it. A wall of windows along the back gave out onto a beautiful park.

Standing at the sink, I glimpsed an amillary sundial surrounded by a pool. The work area was a serious cook's kitchen with modern appliances, generous counters and cabinets, and a pantry. Above it, accessible by the back staircase, was a large loft. Peering over the rail, I laughed. The kitchen furniture down below looked doll-sized from this height.

My inspector had trouble finding anything wrong with the house. Turned out it had been moved 25 years previously, and set on a new, dry foundation. Plumbing and wiring updated, new five-zone heating system and security put in. Bathrooms were ceramic tiled and modern, and even the roof was in good shape. Unbelievably, it was the cheapest house I'd looked at.

Friends warned me that if I moved to downtown Springfield, they wouldn't visit me. I should get a big dog. I should keep the security system on around the clock. I shouldn't let my kids out after dark. I should keep my drapes pulled and not put so much as a hanging plant on my porch.

Call me romantic. Call me naive. Call me stupid. But I bought the house.

Except I didn't only buy a house. I bought a whole neighborhood. Before I'd finished unloading the moving truck, I'd been invited to a party. Not one, but two neighborhood associations served my street. I joined them both.

When cherry blossoms triggered an impromptu festival in the park, I sipped Chardonnay and nibbled hors d'oeuvres under a canopy of pink petals. I walked to the YMCA every day for a swim, sauna, and shower. Hosted one course of a delightful progressive dinner. Handed out programs at the yearly art festival. Got a puppy and met every other dog walker in the neighborhood.

Noise had driven the former owner from the house, but I liked it. Shouts from the basketball court bordering the park, sirens from every fire truck and police car leaving the main stations around the corner, salsa music pouring from open windows, enigmatic bongos I traced to a nearby balcony. Hymns and sermons emanating from the Hispanic church next door. Shopping carts full of scavenged cans and bottles rattling over the brick sidewalks.

When I first noticed the tents on the lawn of the St. Michael's Cathedral in June, I wondered if it was a Boy Scout convention. An indignant e-mail from the civic association the next day enlightened me. Dozens of homeless people had been squatting there for over a month. The citizens of "Sanctuary City" were my newest neighbors.

I found myself irresistibly drawn to this strange encampment. Now Tazzy seemed to be pulling me toward the cathedral on every walk. Somebody would always throw her a bit of food from the makeshift kitchen. While she ran through her tricks, I chatted with residents, gradually making friends.

Now a whole other city within the city became visible to me. Now, within four blocks of my house I could point out where one can go to get a free meal, to take a shower, to have mail delivered, to get a free bus pass. To pimp. To fence a stolen bicycle. To buy a hit of crack.

My neighborhood, the Armory-Quadrangle Historic District, is tiny and fragile. It's the heart of Springfield, and Springfield is the heart of Western Massachusetts. Courageous citizens are struggling to keep this beautiful and remarkable area vibrant and strong. Other, desperately needy citizens are clinging to a shrinking pool of accessible services.

I'm here to stay. But I hope that the tent city is not. I'd like to keep its residents as friends, but I don't wish them a winter spent camping in the shadow of our city's most imposing edifices. What is to be done?

I haven't got those answers. But I do know that a community is only as strong as its weakest members. When I didn't have the city's most shameful secrets in my face every day, I didn't concern myself too much with them, I'm afraid. Now I find it incredible that I could have ever been so ignorant.

Disenfranchisement spawns crime and misery. Problems that affect the heart of the city, if unaddressed, will affect the whole community. Some of you reading this might have some answers. Most of you at least have a vote. You can use it to help those most able to figure out what is to be done.