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The more things change the more they stay the same:

Sticking with a neighborhood in transition

My husband John and I fell in love with St. Petersburg on our first visit five years ago. We chose to live in the Old Northeast, where longtime residents often dropped the term “in transition” into conversations about our section of town. With their eyes on the future, they delighted in telling us about the past. *“We never could have imagined sitting outside at a local Starbucks!”* *“I remember when we used to roller skate through the empty Vinoy!”* *“We’re getting a Publix downtown!”*

A stroll in any direction showcased the eclectic nature of the neighborhood. Waterfront mansions stood around the corner from shabby apartment houses. Dog walkers shared the sidewalks with shady characters who spent all day, every day, hanging around the pay phones outside the Laundromat. Our house was four blocks from a luxury hotel and two blocks from an empty lot which was home to a dead body for a short time. (We were supposed to be reassured by the fact that the lot wasn’t the actual murder site ... it was “just” the dumping ground.)

My husband and I learned to keep our front door locked after our neighbor found a stranger in her living room. And after someone stole a bunch of quarters out of our unlocked car in our unlocked garage, we learned that a fenced-in yard provides only a façade of security.

One Saturday afternoon during our first summer, we decided to go out for lunch before exploring the antique stores that were within spitting distance of our

house. When we sprinted from the restaurant to the car through a heavy rain, we discovered an ankle-deep puddle on the passenger side of our Jeep. I continued around and climbed into the back seat behind John.

We headed up 4th Street and cruised past our first destination, peering out through the torrents of rain, straining to see whether there was an official parking zone out front. A drenched young woman huddled under the store awning in a futile attempt to dodge the deluge. “Wow,” I

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thought, “What a horrendous day to be hitchhiking.”

We turned down the side street, and came back around the block, pulling up to the curb to park. As we slowed down, the woman ran over, opened the door, and hopped in the front seat. “Ok, let’s go!” she said.

I was startled and a little anxious, hoping she wouldn’t become violent when she found out we weren’t going to give her a ride. I offered an apologetic smile over John’s shoulder, while he had an uncharacteristically vehement response. His hands were up, flapping back and forth like windshield wipers. *“No-no-no-no-no!”* he said, shaking his head. And the hitchhiker graciously replied, “Oh!” and hopped right back out, slamming the door behind her. “Oh...my... God,” said my husband.

“Where do you think she wanted us to take her?”

“She didn’t want a *RIDE!*”

“What do you mean?”

He shot me a “surely-you’re-kidding” eye roll.

I admit that I used to be a small-town girl, but I do have a few decades of experience under my belt. I’ve been around. I know the score. But despite my supposed worldliness, I spent the rest of the afternoon shaking my head and alternating among, “Are you *sure* that’s what she was doing?” and “But it’s broad *daylight!*” and “But this is our *neighborhood!*”

Every local who heard the story had the same reaction: “Welcome to St. Petersburg.”

Two years later, Old Northeast is the hot spot that everyone knew it would be. Waterfront high rises for the rich and famous have driven up the price of every square inch of dirt within miles. “In transition” now means that we still keep our doors locked, but we’re protecting homes that we probably couldn’t afford to buy today.

The pay phones outside the Laundromat are gone. The empty lot has nine new condos. There’s a Publix *and* a CVS downtown. And although the 4th Street commercial district is booming with a variety of new businesses and restaurants, a few ladies of the evening — and the daytime — remain. For them, working a street that’s in transition just means they can now stop and enjoy a latte along the way. ☺

THE HOMEFRONT