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# My Memphis: How Neighborhoods in Transition and Transitioning through Neighborhoods shape Identity

A Short Story Collection by Tiegst Ameha

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## Preface

In any city, big or small, there are smaller subsets, neighborhoods that exist and make the city dynamic. In a city like Memphis, an already rich history is ever increasing by way of the growth and change of neighborhoods within it. The many smaller communities and areas that spread out to create Memphis each experience their own periods of growth, decline and stagnation. Within each neighborhood and each transition, a number of factors come into play. Everything from money and its source to timing is important and leads individuals to feel differently about said transition. Not every transition is well-received and those that are, are not universally so. In a city such as Memphis, it is clear that the backgrounds and opinions of its

citizens are as diverse as the cityscape itself. This, of course, makes for a very intriguing and unique experience for each individual as well as a unique perception of these transition periods.

Just as these transitions are rich with differing perspectives, they are rich with practical opportunity, but more importantly and less emphasized is the artistic opportunity in these periods of transition. Indeed, in the past, most Memphis literature has little to do with times of transition for an area, but rather depict Memphis in times that are perhaps historically complicated enough or in some cases leave the change and complications to the characters. However, the importance of place in a person's - or character's - identity is key, therefore writing that is focused on a transitioning place has the ability of showing just how a transition can affect identity.

One notable exception to this lack of exploration is found in a new novel that is set to be released in the coming months. This fall, author and former Memphian Stephen Schottenfeld will release his latest novel, *Bluff City Pawn*. In this work, the plot revolves around a transitioning Summer Avenue and how certain changes in the neighborhood force characters into action.

The goal of my project is to examine the conditions and opinions surrounding transitional periods in two Memphis neighborhoods, Binghampton and Overton Square and properly reflect them in a piece of short fiction. As I have said, outside of Stephen Schottenfeld, there are not many neighborhood specific nor transition specific works of literature about Memphis, so this project will serve to begin to fill this gap in Memphis writing.

Rather than the story collection being stationary glances into individual neighborhoods, the final story will follow the character as she transitions through a number of Memphis neighborhoods. Through her movement through Memphis over a number of years, the story reveals how neighborhoods she once knew well transitioned in the time that she was away from them. But not only do the neighborhoods transition overtime, her identity is shaped by her

experience of these different neighborhoods. Overall, the story calls clear attention to the ways in which place shape identity in addition to the way in which transition shapes perception.

This project will serve to examine and portray the ways in which place, transitioning neighborhoods, and transitioning from neighborhood to neighborhood are able to affect identity. Through characters with voices as distinct as any Memphian you would meet on the street, this collection of short stories allows for a view of this city, these neighborhoods, and these transitions that you would be hard pressed to find in a historical or factual text. And by using characters as a lense through which to look at these situations, it brings the fact that these transitions affect real people and their identities to the foreground of thought.

The Greater Binghampton area extends from Holmes to East Parkway with the North and South boundaries of Summer and Poplar avenues. It is a simple two square miles with a population of roughly 9,000 people. The geography and population of this area are the only things about this neighborhood that can be called “simple”. There is both a complicated past and present when it comes to Binghampton. Ten or fifteen years ago, the atmosphere around the Binghampton area was almost entirely negative. At that time the neighborhood was known for high rates of abandon houses and higher crime rates, a tone very different from today.

At the beginnings of its history, the Binghampton area was a rural town that was notably a racially integrated area in the early 1900’s. With the eastern expansion of Memphis proper, the Binghampton community suddenly found itself in the center of the city. Starting in the 1970’s, Binghampton experienced its biggest shifts. Between 1970 and 2000, there were significant moves out of the Binghampton neighborhood. In fact, the population declined by 31 percent in that time span. Additionally, 10 percent of the houses in the area are abandoned or otherwise unoccupied. These statistics, on top of the fact that the median income of the area is \$26,000 with 33 percent of the households earning no income at all, caused the Binghampton’s reputation to focus mainly on urban blight and crime.

# BINGHAMPTON

Fortunately, in recent years Binghampton has seen a major shift in both attitude and condition. Many community initiatives and development efforts have come into the Binghampton in an effort to improve the neighborhood. The Binghampton Development Corporation is one such initiative and a faith-based nonprofit located centrally in Binghampton across from the Lester Community Center. Many faith-based organizations do work in the neighborhood, however it’s not just the faith communities that are seeking to improve Binghampton. The Memphis art community has put a lot of effort into Binghampton and Broad Avenue, now known as the Broad Avenue Arts District. And, surprisingly enough, the Broad Avenue Water Tower Pavilion is owned by Memphis development conglomerate, Loeb Properties.

Rather than crime and blight being the first thought of Binghampton, people now think of art, community murals, and possibility. An urban farmers market, countless new and promising schools, coffee shops and restaurants all work to integrate the greater Memphis area into this new chapter of Binghampton. Whether it be people visiting for a cup of coffee or people moving to the area in accordance with the idea of intentional living, it seems to be working.

However, though the rest of the people in Memphis appreciate these improvements, the important question is how these changes have affected Binghampton community members. It is a complicated balance between adding coffee shops to integrate the rest of Memphis and the cup of coffee costing 4 dollars that a Binghampton native may not have to spend.

### Friendly

Living in Binghampton is like living in three different neighborhoods at once. It may as well be three different neighborhoods, at least I think so. I have lived in this neighborhood for close to 15 years, and I've seen something new about the place every day. There's the area over by the community center, I like to call that Old Binghampton. Kids playing basketball and having all sorts of fun. Old folks like me sitting out front of their house. Nothing much has changed around there, save a couple of fresh coats of paint. And then there's the place I like to call Art Avenue over down on Broad. There's all sorts of things that artsy people would like, little shops and gallery openings and such. Then there are places mixed in with all the rest where all them folk from out East or even the other side of Midtown come in and start businesses or developments or just decide to move right on in; I never really gave these a name because they're a little too scattered to lump into one name. But any ways, they're these little pieces of other parts of town mixed in with all the rest of it. There's all sorts of things going on in this neighborhood of mine.

I say this neighborhood of mine and hope nobody thinks I'm conceited because of it, but it's the honest to goodness truth. Everyone from Jackson to Poplar and Highland to Overton knows me, and I know them. I make a point of it. I'm not nosy or nothing. No, I like to think I'm just friendly. I always say hello to all my neighbors - even if I know they'll only be there for a couple months before moving again; I always try the new businesses no matter how disinterested I am in their product.

I remember when the smoothie place opened up next to the nice little coffee shop on Walnut Grove. I'm not one for health juices and such, but like I said, I'm friendly. Plus it was right around the corner from Old Binghampton, so it wasn't a far walk.

“Good morning, ma’am! What can I get started for ya?” an overly chipper woman greeted me as I walked in.

“Something that tricks my body into thinking its noon instead of 7. And call me Ms. Mattie, I may be old, but I’m young at heart, and my heart is certainly too youthful to be called ma’am,” I teased the girl. She then suggested some ridiculous sounding concoction I can’t recall now, but when you put wheat and grass in my smoothie, you lose my vote. So I say to her,

“How bout something a little more old school for an old gal like me, strawberry banana?”

“Yes Ms. Mattie, comin right up”

I sat down at a table and waited for my old school smoothie. It was early in the morning, likely a too early for the morning rush I assumed. Right as the sweet little girl from before gave me my drink, a man walked out of the back room looking frazzled as someone who had just woken up. I took a sip and offered a cheerful good morning. He looked a bit surprised to see a customer, again I assumed because of the early hour, but happily returned the greeting nonetheless. We ended up talking, because friendly as I am, I just had to know what this man looked so bent out of shape about. Turns out he was the owner of this business, and he was just as worried as any person who has just started any business - and a restaurant at that. He was a nice little man, and they whipped up a mean strawberry banana smoothie, so I visited him often while they were just starting off and gave them whatever advice I could.

I do the same for most of these businesses - even if they’re not having too much trouble. I like to build up a friendship. Anything from restaurants to convenient stores to the brewery down in Art Avenue. Sure, these places are pricey, and I don’t quite see how they think it can work seeing as most people don’t have the means to go as often as I do, but it’s worth it because of the friends that I have made. And when I go down to Art Avenue, I can’t say I much understand the

beauty of certain murals and art pieces or even the things some of the shops carry, but it's the thought that counts, at least to me anyways. And it's not that I particularly like to eat out or drink, it's more that you can't have a sense of community if you only interact with half the community. That's why I usually take my little grandchildren with me to places like the smoothie store or the different restaurants – so they get a sense of community. Of course, these aren't actually my grandbabies, I never married; but you know how they say it takes a village to raise a little baby? It's just as true here as it is anywhere else. I just have to be sure I rotate them out too so that everyone gets to try new things. It's important to show the neighborhood children the things around them. So most days, I'll go down to the community center and pick up some of my children and take them around and out for lunch. Their moms don't mind of course, remember, I said I know everyone, and they know me and trust me. Plus, it's a free meal and gets them out of the center. Now don't misunderstand me, the community center's great, but most moms don't really see the variety.

I, on the other hand, see exactly how much variety the community center truly offers. I have the luxury of being a little old retired lady who gets to spend her days running around, checking on the kids whose mothers rely on me to keep tabs for them. Of course, they trust me to do all this for them because they've known me since they were the little kids running around in the community center. I'm in that community center more than some of the staff members; it may as well be a job. But like I try to tell these mothers, the community center may just be the one big building, but there's more to do in it than their children know what to do with. There's about 10 basketball courts, tutoring, flag football, dance classes, senior classes, and thanks to yours truly a Zumba class. That's right, I got together with some of the moms who had nights off or what have you, and we made it so that they can have a fun exercise class and add some more

parental presence in that center. And nothing gets those ladies in the community center like an exercise class where all you have to do is dance. We know how to get down and boogie or whatever we're calling it these days. But it's sweet though, young people and old folk all like to come down there any chance they get. There ain't a community center in town that has more community in it than ours.

On any given afternoon, I could walk in and go through the same routine - they know my friendly self all too well. Just the other day, I walked up to the community center and was greeted by all of my neighbors, but not just the people who live next to me, everyone in the whole neighborhood.

"Hey Ms. Mattie!"

"Hey there, babies. How you doin'?" I said to them as they straightened up and were sure to pretend they didn't so much as know a swear word.

"Fine, thank you. How are you?"

"Glad to be here another day," I say this to them every time they ask how I am; I'm certain it instills both religion and gratefulness, two things essential around these parts.

I usually make my rounds a couple times, make sure I see all my people, and then I head on over across the street to that development center. The BCD or BDC or whatever the letters are, is a development company that's supposed to be making our neighborhood nicer. And if you were to look at the building itself, you'd know they're off to a really good start. It's this fancy old thing. One of those buildings that looks all abstract and such, like it's art, lots of big windows and metal structures mixed with brightly colored panels. They even have a big mural with even more bright colors that they painted with the kids. It's really nice, and there's all sorts of things hosted in there like lunches and events. There are a lot of kindhearted people from out east that

work there and try to make our neighborhood a little more advanced in certain areas. Of course, seeing as I know everyone in and everything about the neighborhood, I go in every now and again and make sure everything is going well and even give my own thoughts on a lot of things. They take real kindly to it, though I'm not sure just how much they can actually get around to; they always have two or three projects going, so it's pretty busy around there. Even though most of the neighborhood sees what good these people are doing for us, there are still some folks who see these people as outsiders and stay resentful towards them.

Most of that is just pride talking on the part of some of these neighborhood folks, because even though most of them development people live far out in Germantown or wherever, just as many have been living here longer than me. That's right, they live here in Binghampton, right with all of us. So I don't really see where people find room to complain about them bettering our area. I will say though, some of their practices are a bit odd. I love my home. I love my neighbors. But you wouldn't catch me with any "open door policy". Some of those folks come here and leave their front doors wide open. I'm just as welcoming as the next little old lady - if not more - but you can knock on my door, and then I'll open it to you. Though I can't say I don't appreciate them folks' intentions, crazy as an open door may seem. Bless their heart, it's terribly kind of them - odd, but terribly kind.

I guess when you think about it, our little chunk of Memphis is a weird mishmash of things, but at the end of the day its home to wonderful and hardworking people. Sure things are changing with all this growth, but isn't that what everyone wants? More businesses, more jobs, more opportunities. All of these things are positive. I get that the source of these things can be complicated. I get that some people feel funny about "outsiders". But whether or not you appreciate the help the neighborhood is getting, shouldn't be a question. I'm glad me and my

babies are surrounded by something other than the same torn up old houses that were here when I moved here. Plus, at the end of the day, it's always nice to make new friends. Especially if the new friends are teaching us that there are opportunities beyond what we initially imagined when walking these streets.

There are few - if any - places in midtown Memphis that are as popular as Overton Square is right now. In the past two years, Overton Square has gone from the neighborhood to watch to the new place to be. Restaurants and businesses have flocked to the newly developed Loeb property, all eager to be a part of this new Midtown scene. What most people don't know is that this is more of a revival than something entirely new. Overton Square started decades ago and actually experienced its heyday in the 1970's and 80's.

In 1969, James D. Robinson led a group of young developers including Ben Woodson, Charles H. Hull Jr., and Frank Doggrell III. They were all between the age of 23 and 25 and had the idea to expand what was at the time a popular coffee shop hang out that Robinson opened with his own money. The expansion started out with the idea to have the first TGI Fridays outside of Manhattan, the first of many chain restaurants that now span the nation. However, they faced the obstacle of liquor by the drink being illegal in Memphis at the time. And instead of changing their vision, they changed the law. They used every connection and friendship they could to fill enough petitions to legalize liquor by the drink and shortly thereafter they opened the doors to the first TGI Fridays and the first of many Overton Square shops and restaurants.

## OVERTON SQUARE

From there, Robinson and his crew of developers bought the surrounding space on the block of Madison between Cooper and Florence. Overton Square was home to 11 restaurants and 27 shops. And if the numerous businesses were not enough to attract Memphians, Robinson and his Overton Square partners hosted a number of festivities throughout the year. There were concerts, pub crawls, and yearly Dickens' Christmas festivities complete with carolers dressed in traditional costumes and fake snow falling down the whole block.

Despite booming success and many years of loyal patrons, the years of Overton Square as the belle of the Midtown ball came to an end around the start of the 1990's. Over time shops closed, restaurants closed, and eventually even Friday's subject to a similar fate. Each closing can be attributed to something different, but the point remains that Overton Square was no longer the place to be.

A couple of decades and millions of dollars later, Overton Square is back on its feet. This second phase of the Overton Square story includes 7 new shops and countless restaurants. And while the idea of "new" is appreciated and surely intriguing, Overton Square has maintained its original structures for the most part, so it is easy to still see the traces of old Overton Square. What is now Babalu, a tapas and tacos restaurant, was once the famous first TGI Fridays. When you walk into Local Gastropub for a beer, you are stepping into what was Yosemite Sam's Dancing Disco in a past life. And Robata Ramen recently opened in the Historic Griffin House, known for the owner Elizabeth Griffin's refusal to sell throughout Overton Square's initial development and heyday.

### Original Overton

It was the second Friday of the month, and Oliver's parents were scheduled to arrive in a few hours. His parents started coming for monthly visits when his father first got sick, and this was the first one since he got a clean bill of health at his monthly check-up. And just like the second Friday of every month prior, Oliver waited to the last minute to clean up. Beer bottles and take-out containers could charm a college girl in a pitiful yet endearing kind of way, but not Oliver's parents. For the parents, he took out the nice silverware and stemless wine glasses and put away the collectible cups - and certainly put away those that were from bars. For his parents, he hid his roommate's stash of unmentionable "kitchenware", if you will, and instead put out the crystal bowl his mother thought "fit well with the room". This, to be fair, was true when Oliver and his roommates weren't living like the college boys that they were. The one Friday a month that his parents came for a visit - when the house is actually clean - he had to admit that the expensive crystal actually did fit well with the room.

Just as Oliver straightened the last crooked and misplaced items he got the phone call - the "we're five minutes away...so make sure all the booze, drugs, and women are gone" phone call. Of course, they did not actually say the last part, but Oliver assumed it was in there somewhere. Ten minutes later they arrived, an extra five minutes just in case there actually was booze, drugs, or women Oliver assumed, though he also assumed that the thought could not have even passed through their minds.

Their visit was now routine, a practiced and well-choreographed dance. From the moment that they pulled up in the driveway - two chipper honks - and the silly and childlike knock on the door to where they would go for dinner and what they would order - Paulette's, steaks, sides of mashed potatoes and the veggie of the day with sweet teas all around. This

Friday seemed to be no different, a couple honks on the ride in, same knock, typical small talk that was more formal than familial.

Though everything, up to this point had gone according to plan, Oliver almost choked on his pre-dinner cocktail when his father suggested they try a new restaurant.

“You okay, son?”

“Yeah,” Oliver barely coughed out, “What do you mean new restaurant?”

“Well some of my colleagues mentioned some new places around town so I figured we could try one.”

“Uh, okay.”

“Well pick something and we’ll grab a table.”

“What?” Oliver was still trying to process the change in restaurant when his father suggested “grabbing” a table. It was a little too much.

“Well? What restaurant?” His father barked this in a firm and decisive way that was far more familiar and somehow comforting.

“Why don’t we just go to Overton Square and pick once we get there?”

“Overton Square? Ha-ha. Overton Square sounds delightful.”

Oliver was a bit confused, because he knew for a fact that his father had never been to Overton Square, at least not since he started school in Memphis. And sure, his father had come to Memphis before that on business, and went to school here just like him, but Overton was after his time; it was just getting its start. Oliver discarded the thought and wrote it off as something one of his colleagues had mentioned to him.

A short drive later, they arrived at the corner of Cooper and Madison and managed an exceptional parallel parking job on Madison that onlookers envied. Again, Oliver was perplexed by the way his father got to Overton Square without checking the GPS or even asking for an intersection. This, of course, he chalked up to a good memory and again discarded the thought.

As if the night wasn't surprising enough, upon a quick look around, complete with Oliver's explanation of each restaurant, the family decided on Babalu. Oliver couldn't remember the last time they ate anywhere other than Italian restaurants or Steakhouses, so tapas and tacos was yet another surprisingly uncharacteristic choice, noticed only by him it seemed. He could only get through their drink orders before asking.

"What on Earth is going on? Are you dying? How was your check up?"

"What? Goodness, Ol," his mother gasped, "What's gotten into you?"

"No, what's gotten into you two? Dad wanted to try somewhere new. We're in Midtown. You just ordered margaritas. What is happening?"

"Oh don't be ridiculous, why is it so ludicrous for me to want to branch out? Plus, I wanted to come back to Overton Square."

"See, right there, when have you ever been to Overton Square? We only ever go to Paulette's."

"Son, you realize I grew up in Overton Square? This was the hot spot when I was your age. This is only the second wind of Overton, and I was there for the original."

Oliver's father proceeded to both dazzle and frighten him with stories of that 'original' Overton. He had never heard his father speak in this manner or on any topic near this interesting. For once, Oliver and his father blew far beyond the confines of small talk and course work and into genuine conversation.

"Wait. Wait. Wait." Oliver cuts his father off mid-sentence, something normally not tolerated, "You expect me to believe that the two of you spent your nights A) dancing and B) in a place called Yosemite Sam's Disco Dancing?"

"Well it's the truth after all, it was in the building that Local pub is in. Your father wasn't always a suited businessman; I married a fun one."

"Mom, it's just not possible. Dad, you're fucking with me." Oliver tried to hide the surprised look his face produced from his own words; F-bombs were also a first.

"Son, Overton Square was not the same place back then, just as I am not the same man. I used to party with the best - or worst depending on how you look at it."

Oliver's parents continued on through appetizers, two rounds of margaritas, and dinner with stories from their past. They started all the way back with Perceptions - their tame coffee house hangout - through to the first TGI Fridays - the first restaurant in Memphis to serve liquor by the drink. Oliver was surprised to hear that both his mother and father, who until tonight he never thought of as drinkers, were some of the firsts to sign petitions to legalize restaurants having liquor licenses. They were also the firsts to celebrate it, and indeed they did celebrate. Right around dessert time, his mother grew giddy to tell of the big blizzard of 1976.

"Blizzard of 76? Somehow I'm skeptic. But then again, if ever there was a town with unpredictable weather, it is Memphis."

"Just listen," his father chimed in with an air of still more playfulness lingering behind his wink.

"It was December, just about a week before Christmas, and you father and I came out for dinner."

"Was it dinner or was it dancing at Yosemite Sam's?"

"Oh hush, it was dinner and then dancing! Not the point. It rolled around to about 2 am and the music stopped, and not because they were closing, but someone was going on about snow outside."

"Yes," his father cut in, making it sound like telling this story was a well-timed dance to them, "Of course, this was surprising to all of us, because that December had been uncharacteristically warm."

"But like I said, they kept going on about the snow, finally we decided to see what this woman was talking about, and perhaps she wasn't just a drunk. So we go outside, and sure enough, a thick coat of powdery snow was covering Madison Avenue."

"And it was completely preserved, not a single car had driven by. Naturally, our first inclination was snow angels in the middle of the road."

"Then, of course, a snowball fight. It was the perfect finish to the Charles Dickens theme they had going. It was the final thing to make the Square undeniably picturesque."

"Too bad it was fake snow."

"Wait what?" Oliver's face resembled that of the time they told him the truth about Santa.

“Aw, don’t look so disappointed.” His mother tried to hide her amusement at his childlike reaction, “In the light of morning it was still just as beautiful.”

“Plus there were carolers and people dressed like the characters from the Christmas Carol. In fact, I’m certain some of the carolers were in the play. But like your mom said, absolutely picturesque - and genius. That Robinson fellow sure was a smart businessman. Snow in every direction for a half mile the week before Christmas, everyone in Memphis was at Overton Square.”

Soon the bill arrived, and for once, Oliver was sad to have to leave the dinner table. Usually he was itching for the check and the swift exit. But this time, the bill arrived; his father paid it, and the three quietly, desperately tried to think up a reason or conversation to keep them at the table.

“Lafayette’s!” Oliver let out a breath, relieved to think of something.

“Lafayette’s?” For once his parents were able to contain the giddiness and responded in harmony.

“Let’s go get our night cap at Lafayette’s.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

“Yes,” his father agreed, “Let’s.”

The men took their coats, the lady her purse, and the three wandered a few doors down to Lafayette’s, one of the only businesses from ‘the original’ that made its way back to the new Overton Square. Of course, it was nicer, newer but the perfect place to end the night. They took a table in the heart of the crowd and sat quietly, taking it all in together - the music, the people, the whole night they had just experienced. And as they did, Oliver thanked his lucky stars and James D. Robinson for showing him a side of Overton, but more importantly a side of his parents, that he had never seen before.

I have lived in Memphis for 20 years. For some people they've lived in Memphis for what feels like a lifetime, but for me it quite actually has been a lifetime. While anyone outside of Memphis would assume I have grown tired of the same old city day in day out, it would be preposterous to think that I have seen all of Memphis, let alone grown tired of it.

Though I have not seen *all* of Memphis, it is fair to say I've seen a good amount of it, from a number of angles over a number of years. I was born at Baptist East Memorial Hospital, as far east into East Memphis as one could go without wandering into Germantown just a couple of stop lights down the road. Unlike most kids, my history is much more complex than any story that includes a stork and as such much more confusing when it comes down to what *my* Memphis is.

From the hospital in East Memphis to the home nearly in West Memphis went baby Tiegst. My family lived in downtown Memphis for the first 3 years of my life. But soon, like any city progresses, we moved east, and stopped at the heart of Midtown. I started pre-Kindergarten at Lester Elementary, one of very few public pre-Kindergarten classes in the area, and my older sister went through Kindergarten and 1st grade at Peabody Elementary. These brief stints of public schooling were interrupted by a change to private school. So for a brief period, we lived in Midtown, but attended school in East Memphis.

# MY MEMPHIS

Soon it was time for another big move east. But instead of the two and half mile move east into Midtown, we were now moving an additional 10 miles into the portion of East Memphis that borders the Cordova and Germantown areas. And the final and furthest eastward movement my family made was to open a restaurant in Collierville, effectively splitting my time across a wide expanse that still managed only to reach as far east as my school at the corner of Poplar and Grove Park.

From there my history continues to complicate, because with age comes mobility, and with mobility comes discovery. In a town like Memphis, there was always something new to discover. I continued my private schooling until junior high, and then still continued my East Memphis education as I then entered school at White Station Middle and High Schools respectively. Through Bridge Builders and Imagine Memphis and Leadership Memphis, my Memphis horizon was broadened, and I was both forced and encouraged to move through Memphis actively and often.

By the time it was time to graduate and move on to college, I realized Memphis had so much that I had yet to see, so I decided to stay on for another four years. Ironically, I am now living 5 minutes from my Midtown home and 10 minutes from my Downtown home, while my current family home is 25 minutes from me. Just as the phrase *my* Memphis means many things to many different people, *my* Memphis is an ever expanding, ever complicating idea that couldn't truly be a pinpoint definition.

## My Memphis

On a hot summer day in 1994, somewhere in a hospital on the edge of the Germantown and Memphis border, I was born two weeks before my due date. My parents named me patience because apparently two weeks was two weeks sooner than anyone was ready for. You'd think on their second child they'd be used to the surprises that come with having a little one around. Of course, my name isn't actually "Patience", it's Tiegst which is patience in Amharic. How my two Ethiopian parents met at a dinner party in the 80's in Germantown is surprising in and of itself.

After what I am told was four or five days of oohing and awing at little old me, they loaded me in a car seat and drove me to what would be my new home - though I had lived there 9 months prior, I guess technically it was new to these eyes. We lived in a high rise in downtown Memphis, a full 30 minutes from Baptist East Hospital. Born in the east and settled in the west, my mother would always say. Though I could hardly say I was all that settled, maybe for the first year or so, but then I hit the terrible twos. And before that, my big sis was in her terribles too, stuffing peanut butter sandwiches in the VCR and locking my parents out of the bathroom; so it's really hard to say anyone was that "settled".

This is not to say we were unhappy - though Dad was more than a little upset about his VCR - we certainly all enjoyed ourselves and our downtown digs. We could walk to Court Square from our home. Or take the trolley, us kids loved to take the trolley. Mom would take us to ride the trolley to Easy Way on Main, pick up groceries and then ride the rest of the line a couple more times. Of course, cute as buttons and friendly as we were, my sister and I always made new friends on the trolley. In an age before iPads for toddlers and cell phones for children, this was just as fun as watching Barney and playing with all of our toys.

But soon, it was time to move on; this time when they told me it was time to see my new home, it was in fact new. We moved from Downtown to Midtown, a distinction totally lost on me, as I was now living somewhere with a pool, and though I was only 3 years old, this was something I could certainly appreciate. This place was totally untouched by my terrible two's, and therefore it was sacred space. I was clearly so much older and wiser. I was just a debonair kid, who could rock a pair of floaties like it was nobody's business.

In addition to the cool chick attitude that this new place provided me, I was more than pleased with the fact that Overton Park, the Memphis Zoo, and the Brooks Museum were a five minute drive away. I didn't know much about Overton Park or its history, but I did know it was somewhere for picnics and dog watching - and I, along with every young child in the world, loved dogs. That is - I loved dogs and going to Overton Park until one day our family friend who was visiting from out of town took us there. Begna was just a college kid, so he didn't really know the ropes as far as taking a four year old and a seven year old on an outing. The picnics my mom took us on were close enough to see the dogs but far enough for them not to come near her babies. Begna, however, was a dog lover and took us out on the front lines - my little legs had never run so fast in my life. That day I discovered a small fear of huge dogs. From then on, it was mostly zoo trips, with animals in cages, but boy was it fun.

Soon it was time to move again, but this time the reason was not a pool or the zoo or anything fun like that. I was near the age of starting school. At four, we tried part time preschool. I enjoyed it and met some fun kids, might have even learned a few things. The only problem to my parents was that were zoned for Lester Elementary for pre-K, which they were less than thrilled about. Annie had done Kindergarten and was now in 1st grade at Peabody Elementary which they liked better, but they decided it was time for a change. First the move, was out of

public school and into a private school in East Memphis. This was fine, because we could make friends anywhere - remember, cute as buttons. Plus, Christ Methodist had like three playgrounds, so they could count me in. But CMDS only went up to the 6th grade, so after my first year there my parents made what I now call the preemptive move. I was only in first grade, and we moved to a house in district for White Station, which I wouldn't attend until 7th grade.

Call them crazy, call them thorough, but my parents were not taking any chances when it came to education. They already wanted to buy a house, but they only looked at houses in the district. And as far as us kids go, I may have lied, because this too was a move that was very pool-centric for us. In the end my parents found a house that was in a random part of the White Station district in East Memphis but bordered Germantown, and Cordova. It could've bordered anything for all my sister and I cared – we got an even bigger pool. Ironically, I ended up just a five minute drive from the same hospital that I was once a thirty minute drive from.

So there I was, living at the cross section of Germantown, Cordova, and East Memphis, while going to school and church in the heart of East Memphis, which meant doing service in Binghampton near the Lester school my parents tried to get me away from. I had once lived and thrived in Downtown and Midtown and then suddenly the furthest west I went, outside of service days and field trips, was my school and church which was at the intersection of Poplar and Grove Park.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my school and my church and my mom's work place being all wrapped in one. And it was all conveniently located across the street from a mall on one side and Dinstuhl's candy shop on the other. Plus I already mentioned all the playgrounds. It was a dream. I would use any excuse I could to follow my mom on trips to Laurelwood, even if I

would only have enough time to press my face against the glass and stare at all of the delicious and adorably decorated candy.

Just as I was getting used to everything being centrally located and impossibly convenient, my activity radius had to stretch. In 6th grade, my dad decided to open a restaurant in Collierville. So though I was still living at the cross section of Germantown, Cordova, and East Memphis, while going to school and church in the heart of East Memphis, which meant doing service in Binghampton, and I was now splitting some of my time to be in Collierville at the restaurant we owned. Talk about a well-rounded Memphian - and all before junior high.

Over the years, many things and places in my life changed, but one constant was that I was always getting hurt. I'm just a perpetual accident freak. So one night at the restaurant in Collierville, I managed to brake a couple of glasses and knew I was headed straight for the emergency room. But thinking back to the thirty minute drive from the hospital to my first home, I figured I was in for another wait. Luckily, though I will forever be accident prone, one more thing that did change - we were willing to settle for Baptist Collierville instead of Baptist East, and boy was I glad. Five minute drive, uncomfortable as it was, still beats thirty minutes.

All emergency room visits aside, it was an interesting time in life and my radius was larger than it had ever been. Soon, however, the radius expanded once again. No moving this time, but by the time I was in 11th grade I was volunteering in the University of Memphis area and building bridges all the way downtown, in addition to all my other Memphis hotspots. The Bridge Builders program for high school students meant I was basically going right up to the river twice a month for meetings. Bridges USA is located between 4th and 5th on A.W. Willis, which meant I was driving a pretty similar 30 minute drive. Oh yes, I was driving now, and I thought I was big stuff because of it. At least I did until I almost missed my exit the first day

driving and nearly went over bridge into Arkansas. Though I knew my radius had grown, but I more importantly knew that out of state trips would not be appreciated by Mom.

But life being what it is, soon it was time again for another move - perhaps even an out of state one. This time, it was more than ten years after the last big move, and it was just me. It was time for college, and oddly enough, when I came back to Midtown thinking it would be something familiar, I found I was totally mistaken. Midtown was hip and new. Midtown was Memphis. All the things that I loved as a child were things college freshmen loved too. I could not tell you how many times I went to the zoo the first two years of my college life. Overton Park and the Brooks Museum made their ways back into my life. And, of course, there was a whole world of new restaurants and old dive bars that I was just starting to experience.

The places that defined my childhood were now redefining my young adult life. I finally discovered the old building on the corner of Madison and Belvedere with a mural of an angel was Zinnie's. Finally I understood why my parent's never let me go to the "pretty angel place" when we'd pass by in our car. And I was shocked to find out people my age go to the pool hall that my father when to in his 20's - how people born after me found their way into the P&H was beyond me.

On the one hand I was completely bewildered by how foreign all of this was, but on the other hand I had more knowledge of these places than most students did - though to be fair it was a child's knowledge that mistook a seedy bar for a place that angels hung out. My past informs my present and my present informs my past. Midtown has me for a couple more years, but I'm sure the next neighborhood will shape me and *my* Memphis in all new ways.

## Epilogue

All cases of development and transition involve a number of perspectives and attitudes to take into account. Any change has the potential to affect a person's life and attitude immensely. That being said, these stories are focused on those experiences on an individual level and may not be able to take into account the variety of perspectives out there. However as such, the stories are able to reveal the ways in which place and individual identity interact.

In "Friendly", the main character Ms. Mattie's identity both shapes the way she interacts with her community and is shaped by her interactions with her community. She is a retired woman who obviously has money, therefore she is able to be involved in certain parts of the community that some of her neighbors are not able to. Her light-hearted and kind spirit makes her an approachable person to those around her who trust and rely on her for things they are unable to do on their own. In the same way that Ms. Mattie's identity shapes her interactions, the Binghamton community is also shaping her identity. The abundance of young people in her neighborhood shapes her into a caregiver to those children whose parents are out at work. The diversity of her neighborhood forces her to go out and actively seek "friendship" in the different areas and businesses. But, of course, as even she acknowledges, not everyone is able to be as receptive to the transitions and changes as she is; not everyone has her financial means and sunny demeanor therefore their experience is different.

Identity and place play well with one another in "Original Overton" especially as it follows characters with two very different identities and therefore two very different senses of a single place. Oliver knows Overton Square in the context of his identity as a 20-something year old college student. His parents, however, know Overton Square in the context of their identity as two adults in their 50's. For Oliver, Overton Square is simply the up and coming Midtown

neighborhood, however his parents think of Overton Square in terms of the original years of TGI Fridays and Dickens' Christmas. The fact that they were in their 20's during the time that Overton Square was founded allows them to have an entirely different sense of place than their son has. The part of Oliver's identity - his age - that restricts his sense of place, also opens his idea of place, as he was closer to the current Overton Square than his parents initially were.

For the titular story, "My Memphis", identity and place interact in the opposite way. Rather than identity dictating place, place - and change in place - dictates identity. My different experiences of Memphis throughout the story change the very person I am and the decisions I make. This is as opposed to my history being as simple as the baby born in the hospital, driven to the home which was conveniently located around the corner from the schools she attended and activities she partook in until she went off to college. Obviously, had that been my fate, my identity would be completely different. So through the story and the movement throughout Memphis, my identity was shaped.

Though these are simply case studies in how identity and place interact, it is clear to see that transitions do not happen in a vacuum. Transitions that neighborhoods undergo affect its residents and participants. In the same fashion, transitioning from neighborhood to neighborhood has an effect on a person. Most importantly, these transitions in and through neighborhoods need to be documented carefully, mindfully, and creatively.

## Bibliographic Essay

Though much of this work is that of fiction, my writing was very much so influenced, inspired, and informed by other resources. The entire idea of working with neighborhoods in transition is indebted to Stephen Schottenfeld's novel *Bluff City Pawn* which chronicles a transitioning Summer avenue. Without the inspiration of that storyline, I would not have the collection that I have at all. Throughout the rest of the collection, each story has a series of sources that were instrumental in the writing process, in addition to the first hand observations I conducted on my own.

For the Binghampton introduction and "Friendly", much of my statistical information was provided by the Binghampton Development Corporation. I went through extensive charts and diagrams that broke down everything from median household income to the percentage of abandoned houses. I used a number of newspaper articles as well as personal exploration to find businesses located in Binghampton, such as Loveshack the smoothie shop featured in the story. The Broad Avenue Arts District's webpage also proved helpful for identifying businesses and opportunities in the neighborhood, as well as gauging the accessibility of said things.

"Original Overton" and the rest of the Overton Square section was a very familiar research process. I was already well acquainted with the Commercial Appeal's photo gallery "Overton Square: The Early Years". It is a comprehensive photo gallery of Overton Square starting at its conception, in which each photo has at least a paragraph long caption and is usually accompanied by an article. In addition to all of these articles, an article in the January 2008 issue of Memphis Magazine I found an article, entitled "When It Was Hip to Be Square", was a very helpful supplement for more detailed accounts of Overton Square in its heyday. As for Overton

Square today, I relied mostly on personal observation, while supplementing with a number of the hundreds of articles out there about the new Overton Square.

While the first two stories required articles, archives, and databases, the last story and section “My Memphis” required none of this. As a semi-autobiographical work, most of the information needed was already in my head. I did have to conduct a couple interviews with my parents, especially for further information on the first several years of my life and the bigger reasoning behind things I may not have noticed as they happened. Overall, this work was personal knowledge, reflection, and a few old family albums.