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Burned Out on Detroit

By Adam Ross
Sunday, June 7, 2009

"Last one out turn off the lights" is the running joke around my home town. I don't find it that funny these days. Newspapers have been writing Detroit's obituary for decades, but with two of the Big Three [automakers](#) in [bankruptcy](#), the city I grew up in is dying for real this time. And in a small way, I'm to blame.

I am a third generation Michigander. My grandparents were part of a wave of migrants from overseas and the South who built the city into an industrial powerhouse in the 1930s and '40s. If they were around today, they wouldn't believe the flood of people leaving the state, an exodus I joined in 2005 after living there for the first 24 years of my life. Instead of trying to be part of the recovery, I fled. Of course, that's not how I saw it at the time. But today, looking at what the city has become, I can't help feeling guilty for not wanting to help sift through the wreckage.

But very few people do. According to the [Detroit News](#), a staggering 465,000 people have left Michigan since 2001, roughly 5 percent of the state's population. Detroit's population has shrunk by half since 1950. Roughly 109,000 more people, many with college degrees, left Michigan last year than moved in, one of the worst rates in the nation.

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Even growing up, I never thought I'd stay in Detroit, the city where both my parents were born. By the time I left, most of my friends had moved to places with a future, like Chicago and Los Angeles. I didn't even consider how much Detroit needed someone like me. Not because I'm extraordinarily smart or talented, but because the city is desperate for the sort of youthful energy that complemented its renaissance during World War II and through the 1950s and early '60s. It's that drive that gave my family a chance to prosper, even as the city began to decline.

My maternal grandfather immigrated to Detroit from Montreal and soon went into business with his father, selling a homemade sweeping compound that factories used to clean up their dusty floors. By 1955, my grandfather had opened Detroit Sweeping Compound and Warren Janitorial Supply in the city. The business was small, with modest sales, but it supported a growing family. By 1981, my parents were also working for the family business.

My father and his father-in-law never got along that well. One day, not long after they had begun working together, an argument between them ended with a staple in my father's head and my grandfather on the pavement, my dad's foot on his neck. Not long after, my father did what any sane businessman would do: He quit and took the contacts he had made to start his own janitorial supply business. Budget Janitorial Supply provided toilet paper and paper toweling to subcontractors for the Big Three. My father estimates that more than 90 percent of his clientele was connected to cars in some way.

The business was housed in a small three-bedroom, one-car-garage bungalow in Warren, about 7 miles from downtown Detroit, and resembled a small prison, with bars on the windows and doors. Inside, old metal desks from the '50s sat atop a musty burgundy carpet. The front room of the house had been converted into a walk-in storefront. We lined the walls with shelves and stocked them with chemicals and soap dispensers. When I was a kid I would spend part of my summers cleaning the store, but I can't remember even one customer ever walking in.

While in high school in the 1990s, I got to know Detroit by navigating the potholed streets during summer break delivering large brown boxes of cleaning supplies to nursing homes and industrial warehouses surrounded by abandoned lots of overflowing brush. Detroit was then and still is a strange mix of early-20th-century charm and modern sludge. A once-great metropolis left to rot. Churches without congregations sagged among the many liquor stores and burned buildings from the 1967 race riots. My father remembers the city before the freeways were paved in the 1950s, hastening white flight to the suburbs. Back then, there were dozens of old theaters and vibrant neighborhoods with various foods and cultures. On 7 Mile Road, just a mile south of today's blighted 8 Mile, the street that rapper Eminem made famous, families would go shopping for the latest in high fashion.

Today the city looks like someone has lit a match under it and let it smolder. Yet I still feel pride in it. It's not easy to explain why. Maybe because Detroiters work with their hands and their backs, and I respect that. Maybe it's because a family like mine was able to prosper in a place like this and from an industry it never did anything directly for.

When my parents finally sold their business to a competitor a few weeks before I was scheduled to leave for grad school in Washington in 2005, my father and I headed back to the house where the business had flourished for all those years for a final goodbye.

My father had allowed a former employee to use the office while it sat on the real estate market, and we wanted to see how he'd left it. As we walked through the side door, we saw garbage spilling from bags strewn across the floor where the old metal desks used to stand. Pop bottles filled with urine littered the space. The tenant had broken into one of the neighboring buildings and had run an extension cord from that building through the house. We followed the orange cord through mounds of trash into the front room, where I had manned the counter over those long summers. In one corner was a tin foil fire pit. The black smoke damage stretched from the wall to the ceiling. The stench was unbearable. Without hesitation, I took a final look and walked out the door.

"Thanks Detroit, I owe you so much," I thought. "But goodbye."

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