

Prologue

COLD CITY

Jori and his cousin were cutting up, tossing snowballs at passing cars. From Jori's street corner on Milwaukee's near South Side, cars driving on Sixth Street passed squat duplexes with porch steps ending at a sidewalk edged in dandelions. Those heading north approached the Basilica of St. Josaphat, whose crowning dome looked to Jori like a giant overturned plunger. It was January of 2008, and the city was experiencing the snowiest winter on record. Every so often, a car turned off Sixth Street to navigate Arthur Avenue, hemmed in by the snow, and that's when the boys would take aim. Jori packed a tight one and let it fly. The car jerked to a stop, and a man jumped out. The boys ran inside and locked the door to the apartment where Jori lived with his mother, Arleen, and younger brother, Jafaris. The lock was cheap, and the man broke down the door with a few hard-heeled kicks. He left before anything else happened. When the landlord found out about the door, she decided to evict Arleen and her boys. They had been there eight months.

The day Arleen and her boys had to be out was cold. But if she

waited any longer, the landlord would summon the sheriff, who would arrive with a gun, a team of boot-footed movers, and a folded judge's order saying that her house was no longer hers. She would be given two options: truck or curb. "Truck" would mean that her things would be loaded into an eighteen-footer and later checked into bonded storage. She could get everything back after paying \$350. Arleen didn't have \$350, so she would have opted for "curb," which would mean watching the movers pile everything onto the sidewalk. Her mattresses. A floor-model television. Her copy of *Don't Be Afraid to Discipline*. Her nice glass dining table and the lace tablecloth that fit just-so. Silk plants. Bibles. The meat cuts in the freezer. The shower curtain. Jafaris's asthma machine.

Arleen took her sons—Jori was thirteen, Jafaris was five—to a homeless shelter, which everyone called the Lodge so you could tell your kids, "We're staying at the Lodge tonight," like it was a motel. The two-story stucco building could have passed for one, except for all the Salvation Army signs. Arleen stayed in the 120-bed shelter until April, when she found a house on Nineteenth and Hampton, in the predominantly black inner city, on Milwaukee's North Side, not far from her childhood home. It had thick trim around the windows and doors and was once Kendal green, but the paint had faded and chipped so much over the years that the bare wood siding was now exposed, making the house look camouflaged. At one point someone had started repainting the house plain white but had given up mid-brushstroke, leaving more than half unfinished. There was often no water in the house, and Jori had to bucket out what was in the toilet. But Arleen loved that it was spacious and set apart from other houses. "It was quiet," she remembered. "And five-twenty-five for a whole house, two bedrooms upstairs and two bedrooms downstairs. It was my favorite place."

After a few weeks, the city found Arleen's favorite place "unfit for human habitation," removed her, nailed green boards over the windows and doors, and issued a fine to her landlord. Arleen moved Jori

and Jafaris into a drab apartment complex deeper in the inner city, on Atkinson Avenue, which she soon learned was a haven for drug dealers. She feared for her boys, especially Jori—slack-shouldered, with pecan-brown skin and a beautiful smile—who would talk to anyone.

Arleen endured four summer months on Atkinson before moving into a bottom duplex unit on Thirteenth Street and Keefe, a mile away. She and the boys walked their things over. Arleen held her breath and tried the lights, smiling with relief when they came on. She could live off someone else's electricity bill for a while. There was a fist-sized hole in a living-room window, the front door had to be locked with an ugly wooden plank dropped into metal brackets, and the carpet was filthy and ground in. But the kitchen was spacious and the living room well lit. Arleen stuffed a piece of clothing into the window hole and hung ivory curtains.

The rent was \$550 a month, utilities not included, the going rate in 2008 for a two-bedroom unit in one of the worst neighborhoods in America's fourth-poorest city. Arleen couldn't find a cheaper place, at least not one fit for human habitation, and most landlords wouldn't rent her a smaller one on account of her boys. The rent would take 88 percent of Arleen's \$628-a-month welfare check. Maybe she could make it work. Maybe they could at least stay through winter, until crocuses and tulips stabbed through the thawed ground of spring, Arleen's favorite season.

There was a knock at the door. It was the landlord, Sherrena Tarver. Sherrena, a black woman with bobbed hair and fresh nails, was loaded down with groceries. She had spent \$40 of her own money and picked up the rest at a food pantry. She knew Arleen needed it.

Arleen thanked Sherrena and closed the door. Things were off to a good start.

EVEN IN THE most desolate areas of American cities, evictions used to be rare. They used to draw crowds. Eviction riots erupted during the Depression, even though the number of poor families who faced

eviction each year was a fraction of what it is today. A *New York Times* account of community resistance to the eviction of three Bronx families in February 1932 observed, "Probably because of the cold, the crowd numbered only 1,000."¹ Sometimes neighbors confronted the marshals directly, sitting on the evicted family's furniture to prevent its removal or moving the family back in despite the judge's orders. The marshals themselves were ambivalent about carrying out evictions. It wasn't why they carried a badge and a gun.

These days, there are sheriff squads whose full-time job is to carry out eviction and foreclosure orders. There are moving companies specializing in evictions, their crews working all day, every weekday. There are hundreds of data-mining companies that sell landlords tenant screening reports listing past evictions and court filings.² These days, housing courts swell, forcing commissioners to settle cases in hallways or makeshift offices crammed with old desks and broken file cabinets—and most tenants don't even show up. Low-income families have grown used to the rumble of moving trucks, the early-morning knocks at the door, the belongings lining the curb.

Families have watched their incomes stagnate, or even fall, while their housing costs have soared. Today, the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half of their income on housing, and at least one in four dedicates over 70 percent to paying the rent and keeping the lights on.³ Millions of Americans are evicted every year because they can't make rent. In Milwaukee, a city of fewer than 105,000 renter households, landlords evict roughly 16,000 adults and children each year. That's sixteen families evicted through the court system daily. But there are other ways, cheaper and quicker ways, for landlords to remove a family than through court order. Some landlords pay tenants a couple hundred dollars to leave by the end of the week. Some take off the front door. Nearly half of all forced moves experienced by renting families in Milwaukee are "informal evictions" that take place in the shadow of the law. If you count all forms of involuntary displacement—formal and informal evictions, landlord foreclosures,

building condemnations—you discover that between 2009 and 2011 more than 1 in 8 Milwaukee renters experienced a forced move.⁴

There is nothing special about Milwaukee when it comes to eviction. The numbers are similar in Kansas City, Cleveland, Chicago, and other cities. In 2013, 1 in 8 poor renting families nationwide were unable to pay all of their rent, and a similar number thought it was likely they would be evicted soon.⁵ This book is set in Milwaukee, but it tells an American story.

Evicted follows eight families—some black, some white; some with children, some without—swept up in the process of eviction. The evictions take place throughout the city, embroiling not only landlords and tenants but also kin and friends, lovers and ex-lovers, judges and lawyers, dope suppliers and church elders. Eviction's fallout is severe. Losing a home sends families to shelters, abandoned houses, and the street. It invites depression and illness, compels families to move into degrading housing in dangerous neighborhoods, uproots communities, and harms children. Eviction reveals people's vulnerability and desperation, as well as their ingenuity and guts.

Fewer and fewer families can afford a roof over their head. This is among the most urgent and pressing issues facing America today, and acknowledging the breadth and depth of the problem changes the way we look at poverty. For decades, we've focused mainly on jobs, public assistance, parenting, and mass incarceration. No one can deny the importance of these issues, but something fundamental is missing. We have failed to fully appreciate how deeply housing is implicated in the creation of poverty. Not everyone living in a distressed neighborhood is associated with gang members, parole officers, employers, social workers, or pastors. But nearly all of them have a landlord.

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HIGH TOLERANCE

Scott had no intention of fighting his eviction. He skipped his court date and never talked to Tobin about it. Instead, he focused his efforts on finding another place to live. After several calls, Pito from Narcotics Anonymous came through. Pito worked with landlords, repairing and filling their properties, and vouched for Scott to one he knew. The two-bedroom upper was on the near South Side. It was small and bare with a treacherous balcony and no shower. But the landlord was only asking \$420 a month and didn't bother with a background check.

The apartment also came with Pito's nephew, who went by D.P. A baby-faced nineteen-year-old with several tattoos and earrings, D.P. had recently been released from prison, where he was serving time for weapons possession and tampering with a firearm. He had sawed off the barrel of a shotgun. D.P. ran with the Cobras and wanted a gun in case things heated up with the Kings. In prison, he got his GED and another tattoo that read BEGINNING.

One day, Pito learned from another landlord that an old man had

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died in a nearby trailer park and no one had come to claim his things. So he arranged for Scott and D.P. to clean out the trailer in exchange for them keeping whatever they wanted. In the dead man's closet, Scott had found a pressed suit in a zipped garment bag and a silk-lined suitcase. In the bathroom, he had learned the man's name from mailing stickers on *American Legion* magazines. But Scott found the cigarette burns next to the bed most revealing. They led him to speculate that the man was on morphine. In Scott's mind, drugs explained a lot about the world: why this man had died alone, why Pam and Ned got tossed from the trailer park, and why he was in a stranger's home, collecting shabby furniture for his apartment.

The new roommates loaded a dresser and sofa onto the oily bed of a Ford F-150. When the truck was full, D.P. started the engine and turned on loud rap music. Scott would have preferred something else—his favorite song was "Solsbury Hill" by Peter Gabriel—but he didn't say anything.

Scott was still on Mira's crew, but work had slowed. Mira had run through her jobs too quickly by working her men twelve hours a day, lugging washers and dryers, mattresses, sleeper sofas. When workers said they were exhausted or sore, Mira sold them painkillers. But Scott thought she charged too much. When he needed relief, he would ask Heroin Susie to meet him somewhere.

"I want to do what Pito's doing," D.P. said. "I want to come home clean and leave the house clean. I can't see myself at thirty doing this bullshit."

Scott couldn't either, years ago, when he was D.P.'s age.

After unloading the furniture, D.P. and Scott shared a beer on their front steps. The apartment was on Ward Street, on the west side of Kinnickinnic Avenue, which the locals shortened to "KK." It faced an undeveloped plot of land surrounding railroad tracks and was not far from an apartment Scott used to rent years ago, when he was still a nurse and living in Bay View, a thriving neighborhood that attracted young professionals, artists, and hipsters. From their stoop, Scott and

D.P. could see the crowning dome of the Basilica of St. Josaphat. One hundred years ago, Polish parishioners had emptied their savings accounts to fund the massive building project, "a scaled-down version of St. Peter's in Rome." As Scott drank his beer, he joked about "taking his own vow of poverty. . . . All I'm going to do is buy some food and clothes and some drugs now and again."

D.P. said nothing.

"Damn," Scott said after the moment had passed. "My neck and back are killing me." His shifts with Mira were beginning to take a toll.

"Why don't you go to the doctor?" D.P. asked.

"Because I don't think there's anything they can do." Scott paused.

"They could give me Percocet! Too bad I'd eat them all in one day."

SCOTT STILL BOUGHT his Vicodin at the trailer park. He thought Mrs. Mytes was the only adult there who didn't do drugs or have a history with them. Scott loved drugs. Being high was a "mini vacation" from his shame of a life. He took the trip whenever he could afford it.

Scott had gotten high with Pam and Ned shortly before they received their eviction notice and had moved in a hurry, leaving behind a couch, beds, dressers, and other large items. Scott figured Ned and Pam got what was coming to them. In his old life, before the fall, he might have been more sympathetic. But he had come to view sympathy as a kind of naïveté, a sentiment voiced from a certain distance by the callow middle classes. "They can be compassionate because it's not their only option," he said of liberals who didn't live in trailer parks. As for Ned and Pam, Scott thought their eviction came down to their crack habit, plain and simple. Heroin Susie agreed with him. "There's a common denominator for all evictions," she said. "I almost got evicted once. Used the money for other things."

Trailer park residents rarely raised a fuss about a neighbor's eviction, whether that person was a known drug addict or not. Evictions were deserved, understood to be the outcome of individual failure.

They "helped get rid of the riffraff," some said. No one thought the poor more undeserving than the poor themselves.²

In years past, renters opposed landlords and saw themselves as a "class" with shared interests and a unified purpose. During the early twentieth century, tenants organized against evictions and unsanitary conditions. When landlords raised rents too often or too steeply, tenants went so far as to stage rent strikes. Strikers joined together to withhold rent and form picket lines, risking eviction, arrest, and beatings by hired thugs. They were not an especially radical bunch, these strikers. Most were ordinary mothers and fathers who believed landlords were entitled to modest rent increases and fair profits, but not "price gouging." In New York City, the great rent wars of the Roaring Twenties forced a state legislature to impose rent controls that remain the country's strongest to this day.³

Petitions, picket lines, civil disobedience—this kind of political mobilization required a certain shift in vision. "For a protest movement to arise out of [the] traumas of daily life," the sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have observed, "the social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem both unjust and mutable."⁴ This usually happened during extraordinary times, when large-scale social transformations or economic disturbances—the postwar housing shortage, say—profoundly upset the status quo. But it was not enough simply to perceive injustice. Mass resistance was possible only when people believed they had the collective capacity to change things. For poor people, this required identifying with the oppressed, and counting yourself among them—which was something most trailer park residents were absolutely unwilling to do.

During rent strikes, tenants believed they had a moral obligation to one another.⁵ If tenants resisted excessive rent hikes or unwarranted evictions, it was because they invested in their homes and neighborhoods. They felt they belonged there. In the trailer park, that sentiment was almost dead. For most residents, Scott among them, the goal

was to leave, not to plant roots and change things. Some residents described themselves as "just passing through," even if they had been passing through nearly all their life. One, an out-of-work father of three who powered his trailer with stolen electricity, said, "We don't let family come here. It's not us. It's lower-class living, and I didn't come from this." Lenny's ex-wife, who being Lenny's ex-wife was virtually married to the trailer park at one time, liked to tell people, "You forget that I'm the one that used to go to the opera." Tam, the pregnant drug addict, thought of the trailer park "as a hotel."

Poor neighborhoods provided their residents with quite a lot. In the trailer park, residents met people who knew how to pirate cable, when the best food pantries were open, and how to apply for SSI. All over the city, people who lived in distressed neighborhoods were more likely to help their neighbors pay bills, buy groceries, fix their car, or lend a hand in other ways, compared to their peers in better-off areas.⁶ These exchanges helped people on the receiving end meet basic material needs; and they helped those on the delivering end feel more fully human.

But for such vital exchanges to take place, residents had to make their needs known and acknowledge their failures. For Larraine to ask her neighbor if she could use her shower, she needed to explain that her gas had been shut off. That fact became public when she walked back to her trailer with wet hair. On another occasion, a tenant named Rose had her children taken by Child Protective Services. Trailer park residents sat beside her as she wailed. They comforted her and made sure she didn't hurt herself, but because they saw what had happened, they also judged her. "It ain't nothing to be proud of," Dawn told her. "But the Lord took 'em for some reason."⁷

When people began to view their neighborhood as brimming with deprivation and vice, full of "all sorts of shipwrecked humanity," they lost confidence in its political capacity.⁸ Milwaukee renters who perceived higher levels of neighborhood trauma—believing that their neighbors had experienced incarceration, abuse, addiction, and other harrowing events—were far less likely to believe that people in their

community could come together to improve their lives.⁹ This lack of faith had less to do with their neighborhood's actual poverty and crime rates than with the level of concentrated suffering they perceived around them. A community that saw so clearly its own pain had a difficult time also sensing its potential.

Every so often, Tobin's tenants would air a passing remark about their landlord's profits or call him a greedy Jew. *"That Cadillac got some shiny rims. I know that didn't cost no ten dollars."* *"He just wants to butter his pockets."* But for the most part, tenants had a high tolerance for inequality. They spent little time questioning the wide gulf separating their poverty from Tobin's wealth or asking why rent for a worn-out aluminum-wrapped trailer took such a large chunk of their income. Their focus was on smaller, more tangible problems. When Witkowski reported Tobin's annual income to be close to \$1 million, a man who lived on the same side of the park as Scott said, "I'd give two shits. . . . As long as he keeps things the way he's supposed to here, and I don't have to worry about the freaking ceiling caving in, I don't care."

Most renters in Milwaukee thought highly of their landlord.¹⁰ Who had time to protest inequality when you were trying to get the rotten spot in your floorboard patched before your daughter put her foot through it again? Who cared what the landlord was making as long as he was willing to work with you until you got back on your feet? There was always something worse than the trailer park, always room to drop lower. Residents were reminded of this when the whole park was threatened with eviction, and they felt it again when men from Bieck Management began collecting rents.¹¹

IT HAD BEEN a bad week. First Scott lost his keys and decided to break into his apartment by putting a fist through the front window. Then his electricity went out. Then Mira fired him. Nothing personal: she had found a crew of hypes willing to work for \$25 a day. In NA, Scott had learned that addiction tightened its grip when you were hungry, angry, lonely, or tired—"HALT"—and Scott was all four.

After Mira fired him, he used part of his last paycheck to get drunk and high at a friend's house. That's when he called his mom, a hospital housekeeper in rural Iowa. On the phone, Scott told his mother about his drinking (but not the heroin) and about losing his nursing license after getting hooked on painkillers. She knew none of it. Scott hadn't spoken to his mother in over a year.

"Mom," Scott was crying. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess. I'm a fucking mess."

Before Scott could finish, his mother cut him off, failing to realize that it took everything he had in him (and a twelve-pack) to dial all ten numbers and not hang up when he got to the seventh or ninth, like he usually did. She explained that she was in a van full of relatives and unable to talk at the moment. They were all going to Branson, Missouri, for the weekend. "But, Scott," she said, "you know that you can always come home."

Scott thought about her offer. How could he get to Iowa with no car and no money for a train ticket? And how could he find heroin there? After a day, the sick would start working its way through his body. Then there was the part about being an object of pity. Scott thought about this as he walked through Pick 'n Save the day after the call. He had offered to buy Heroin Susie lunch with his food stamps if she'd give him a hit. "I mean, I could go back home, but, damn, I'm forty fucking years old . . . I'd have to go back and tell them, you know, that I fucked my whole fucking life up." Scott had never reached out to his family for help. He considered their lawns and jobs and children and normal problems and concluded, "They wouldn't know what to do. . . . How much help could they possibly be?" Middle-class relatives could be useless that way.

Scott joined the checkout line and noticed the man in front of him was buying Robitussin.

"You got a cold?" Scott asked.

"Yeah," the man said. "Can't seem to shake it." He coughed as if to prove his point.

"Here," Scott said. He took out a pen and scrap of paper and wrote, "*Vitamin C, Zinc, and Echinacea.*" "That's what I would recommend," he said.

Scott didn't go back to Iowa. Instead, he decided to go to rehab. On the morning he planned to check himself in, Scott woke up while it was still dark, trimmed his beard, and tucked in his T-shirt. He wanted to climb back out. He felt nervous but ready.

When Scott stepped out of the elevator at seven a.m., an hour before the clinic's doors opened, he saw that he was late. Fifteen people were already in line. There were older black men who had dressed up for the occasion; a foulmouthed white woman, fifty perhaps, in cowboy boots; a pair of young Mexican men sitting on their feet and whispering in Spanish; a twenty-something black man whose pants were falling down; a brooding, white teenager who had pulled her bangs over her eyes and her sleeves over her hands. Scott slumped against the wall at the end of the line.

After a few minutes, the elevator opened again and an older Mexican woman stepped out. Her hair was long and black except for a streak of gray down the middle. She wore a walking cast and looked over her large glasses with eyes the color of floodwater. She resigned herself to a spot on the floor next to Scott.

The woman told Scott she had been there the day before, but they only took four people. When social workers began appearing at desks behind the glass, she observed, "They are calling the county to see how many spots are available."

"For what?" Scott asked sardonically.

"For *you*. You're here to get treatment, right?"

Scott looked up at the ceiling's fluorescent lights and inhaled slowly, purposefully. He was trying to endure. "Yes."

"Look at that girl," the woman motioned to the white teenager. "She looks suicidal. I'll bet they take her in. You have to camp out to get a spot."

Scott began to tap his foot.

At 8:10 a.m., a woman wearing gold earrings and a silk blouse opened the door and announced that they could take five people today. A man emerged with a clipboard. "Number 1. Number 2," he began counting. The line stood and tightened. Scott stepped toward the elevator and pushed the Down button. He could have tried again the next day, but he went on a three-day bender instead.

Epilogue

HOME AND HOPE

The home is the center of life. It is a refuge from the grind of work, the pressure of school, and the menace of the streets. We say that at home, we can “be ourselves.” Everywhere else, we are someone else. At home, we remove our masks.

The home is the wellspring of personhood. It is where our identity takes root and blossoms, where as children, we imagine, play, and question, and as adolescents, we retreat and try. As we grow older, we hope to settle into a place to raise a family or pursue work. When we try to understand ourselves, we often begin by considering the kind of home in which we were raised.

In languages spoken all over the world, the word for “home” encompasses not just shelter but warmth, safety, family—the womb. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for “home” was often used in place of “mother.” The Chinese word *jiā* can mean both family and home. “Shelter” comes from two Old English words: *scield* (shield) and *truma* (troop), together forming the image of a family gathering itself within a protective shell.¹ The home remains the primary basis of life. It is

where meals are shared, quiet habits formed, dreams confessed, traditions created.

Civic life too begins at home, allowing us to plant roots and take ownership over our community, participate in local politics, and reach out to neighbors in a spirit of solidarity and generosity. "It is difficult to force a man out of himself and get him to take an interest in the affairs of the whole state," Alexis de Tocqueville once observed. "But if it is a question of taking a road past his property, he sees at once that this small public matter has a bearing on his greatest private interests."² It is only after we begin to see a street as *our* street, a public park as *our* park, a school as *our* school, that we can become engaged citizens, dedicating our time and resources for worthwhile causes: joining the Neighborhood Watch, volunteering to beautify a playground, or running for school board.

Working on behalf of the common good is the engine of democracy, vital to our communities, cities, states—and, ultimately, the nation. It is "an outflow of the idealism and moralism of the American people," wrote Gunnar Myrdal.³ Some have called this impulse "love of country" or "patriotism" or the "American spirit." But whatever its name, its foundation is the home. What else is a nation but a patchwork of cities and towns; cities and towns a patchwork of neighborhoods; and neighborhoods a patchwork of homes?

America is supposed to be a place where you can better yourself, your family, and your community. But this is only possible if you have a stable home. When Scott was provided with an affordable apartment through the Guest House's permanent housing program, he was able to stay off heroin, find meaningful work as a resident manager for homeless people, and begin striving for independence. He remains stably housed and sober. And then there are the Hinkstons. After Malik Jr. was born, Patrice and Doreen finally did move to Brownsville, Tennessee, a town of about 10,000. They found a nice three-bedroom place. Out of the rat hole, Patrice earned her GED, impressing her teacher so much that she was named Adult Learner of the Year. Patrice

went on to enroll in a local community college, where she took online classes in computers and criminal justice, hoping to one day become a parole officer. She liked to half joke, "I got a lot of friends who are criminal who are going to need my help!"

The persistence and brutality of American poverty can be disheartening, leaving us cynical about solutions. But as Scott and Patrice will tell you, a good home can serve as the sturdiest of footholds. When people have a place to live, they become better parents, workers, and citizens.

If Arleen and Vanetta didn't have to dedicate 70 or 80 percent of their income to rent, they could keep their kids fed and clothed and off the streets. They could settle down in one neighborhood and enroll their children in one school, providing them the opportunity to form long-lasting relationships with friends, role models, and teachers. They could start a savings account or buy their children toys and books, perhaps even a home computer. The time and emotional energy they spent making rent, delaying eviction, or finding another place to live when homeless could instead be spent on things that enriched their lives: community college classes, exercise, finding a good job, maybe a good man too.

But our current state of affairs "reduces to poverty people born for better things."⁴ For almost a century, there has been broad consensus in America that families should spend no more than 30 percent of their income on housing.⁵ Until recently, most renting families met this goal. But times have changed—in Milwaukee and across America. Every year in this country, people are evicted from their homes not by the tens of thousands or even the hundreds of thousands but by the millions.⁶

UNTIL RECENTLY, WE simply didn't know how immense this problem was, or how serious the consequences, unless we had suffered them ourselves. For years, social scientists, journalists, and policymakers all but ignored eviction, making it one of the least studied processes

affecting the lives of poor families. But new data and methods have allowed us to measure the prevalence of eviction and document its effects. We have learned that eviction is commonplace in poor neighborhoods and that it exacts a heavy toll on families, communities, and children.

Residential stability begets a kind of psychological stability, which allows people to invest in their home and social relationships. It begets school stability, which increases the chances that children will excel and graduate. And it begets community stability, which encourages neighbors to form strong bonds and take care of their block.⁷ But poor families enjoy little of that because they are evicted at such high rates. That low-income families move often is well known. *Why* they do is a question that has puzzled researchers and policymakers because they have overlooked the frequency of eviction in disadvantaged neighborhoods.⁸ Between 2009 and 2011, roughly a quarter of all moves undertaken by Milwaukee's poorest renters were involuntary. Once you account for those dislocations (eviction, landlord foreclosure), low-income households move at a similar rate as everyone else.⁹ If you study eviction court records in other cities, you arrive at similarly startling numbers. Jackson County, Missouri, which includes half of Kansas City, saw 19 formal evictions a day between 2009 and 2013. New York City courts saw almost 80 nonpayment evictions a day in 2012. That same year, 1 in 9 occupied rental households in Cleveland, and 1 in 14 in Chicago, were summoned to eviction court.¹⁰ Instability is not inherent to poverty. Poor families move so much because they are forced to.

Along with instability, eviction also causes loss. Families lose not only their home, school, and neighborhood but also their possessions: furniture, clothes, books. It takes a good amount of money and time to establish a home. Eviction can erase all that. Arleen lost everything. Larraine and Scott too. Eviction can cause workers to lose their jobs. The likelihood of being laid off is roughly 15 percent higher for workers who have experienced an eviction. If housing instability leads to

employment instability, it is because the stress and consuming nature of being forced from your home wreak havoc on people's work performance.¹¹ Often, evicted families also lose the opportunity to benefit from public housing because Housing Authorities count evictions and unpaid debt as strikes when reviewing applications. And so people who have the greatest need for housing assistance—the rent-burdened and evicted—are systematically denied it.¹²

This—the loss of your possessions, job, home, and access to government aid—helps explain why eviction has such a pronounced effect on what social scientists call “material hardship,” a measure of the texture of scarcity. Material hardship assesses, say, whether families experience hunger or sickness because food or medical care is financially out of reach or go without heat, electricity, or a phone because they can't afford those things. The year after eviction, families experience 20 percent higher levels of material hardship than similar families who were not evicted. They go without food. They endure illness and cold. Evicted families continue to have higher levels of material hardship at least two years after the event.¹³

These families are often compelled to accept substandard housing conditions. In Milwaukee, renters whose previous move was involuntary were 25 percent more likely to experience long-term housing problems than similar renters who moved under less trying circumstances.¹⁴

And families forced from their homes are pushed into undesirable parts of the city, moving from poor neighborhoods into even poorer ones; from crime-filled areas into still more dangerous ones. Arleen's favorite place was nested in a working-class black neighborhood. After the city condemned it and forced her out, she moved into an apartment complex teeming with drug dealers. Even after controlling for a host of important factors, families who experience a forced move relocate to worse neighborhoods than those who move under less demanding circumstances.¹⁵ Concentrated poverty and violence inflict their own wounds, since neighborhoods determine so much about your life,

from the kinds of job opportunities you have to the kinds of schools your children attend.¹⁶

Then there is the toll eviction takes on a person's spirit. The violence of displacement can drive people to depression and, in extreme cases, even suicide. One in two recently evicted mothers reports multiple symptoms of clinical depression, double the rate of similar mothers who were not forced from their homes. Even after years pass, evicted mothers are less happy, energetic, and optimistic than their peers.¹⁷ When several patients committed suicide in the days leading up to their eviction, a group of psychiatrists published a letter in *Psychiatric Services*, identifying eviction as a "significant precursor of suicide." The letter emphasized that none of the patients were facing homelessness, leading the psychiatrists to attribute the suicides to eviction itself. "Eviction must be considered a traumatic rejection," they wrote, "a denial of one's most basic human needs, and an exquisitely shameful experience." Suicides attributed to evictions and foreclosures doubled between 2005 and 2010, years when housing costs soared.¹⁸

Eviction even affects the communities that displaced families leave behind. Neighbors who cooperate with and trust one another can make their streets safer and more prosperous. But that takes time. Efforts to establish local cohesion and community investment are thwarted in neighborhoods with high turnover rates. In this way, eviction can unravel the fabric of a community, helping to ensure that neighbors remain strangers and that their collective capacity to combat crime and promote civic engagement remains untapped.¹⁹ Milwaukee neighborhoods with high eviction rates have higher violent crime rates the following year, even after controlling for past crime rates and other relevant factors.²⁰

Losing your home and possessions and often your job; being stamped with an eviction record and denied government housing assistance; relocating to degrading housing in poor and dangerous neighborhoods; and suffering from increased material hardship, homelessness, depression, and illness—this is eviction's fallout. Eviction

does not simply drop poor families into a dark valley, a trying yet relatively brief detour on life's journey. It fundamentally redirects their way, casting them onto a different, and much more difficult, path. Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty.

Eviction affects the old and the young, the sick and able-bodied. But for poor women of color and their children, it has become ordinary. Walk into just about any urban housing court in America, and you can see them waiting on hard benches for their cases to be called. Among Milwaukee renters, over 1 in 5 black women report having been evicted in their adult life, compared with 1 in 12 Hispanic women and 1 in 15 white women.²¹

Most evicted households in Milwaukee have children living in them, and across the country, many evicted children end up homeless. The substandard housing and unsafe neighborhoods to which many evicted families must relocate can degrade a child's health, ability to learn, and sense of self-worth.²² And if eviction has lasting effects on mothers' depression, sapping their energy and happiness, then children will feel that chill too. Parents like Arleen and Vanetta wanted to provide their children with stability, but eviction ruined that, pulling kids in and out of school and batting them from one neighborhood to the next. When these mothers finally did find another place to live, they once again began giving landlords most of their income, leaving little for the kids. Families who spend more on housing spend less on their children.²³ Poor families are living above their means, in apartments they cannot afford. The thing is, those apartments are already at the bottom of the market.²⁴ Our cities have become unaffordable to our poorest families, and this problem is leaving a deep and jagged scar on the next generation.

ALL THIS SUFFERING is shameful and unnecessary. Because it is unnecessary, there is hope. These problems are neither intractable nor eternal. A different kind of society is possible, and powerful solutions are within our collective reach.

But those solutions depend on how we answer a single question: do we believe that the right to a decent home is part of what it means to be an American?

The United States was founded on the noble idea that people have "certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Each of these three unalienable rights—so essential to the American character that the founders saw them as God-given—requires a stable home.

Life and home are so intertwined that it is almost impossible to think about one without the other. The home offers privacy and personal security. It protects and nurtures. The ideal of liberty has always incorporated not only religious and civil freedoms but also the right to flourish: to make a living however one chooses, to learn and develop new skills. A stable home allows us to strive for self-reliance and personal expression, to seek gainful employment and enjoy individual freedoms.

And happiness? It was there in the smile that flashed across Jori's face when Arleen was able to buy him a new pair of sneakers, in the church hymn Lorraine hummed when she was able to cook a nice meal, in the laughter that burst out of the Hinkstons' house after a good prank. The pursuit of happiness undeniably includes the pursuit of material well-being: minimally, being able to secure basic necessities. It can be overwhelming to consider how much happiness has been lost, how many capabilities snuffed out, by the swell of poverty in this land and our collective decision not to provide all our citizens with a stable and decent place to live.

We have affirmed provision in old age, twelve years of education, and basic nutrition to be the right of every citizen because we have recognized that human dignity depends on the fulfillment of these fundamental human needs. And it is hard to argue that housing is not a fundamental human need. Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple: without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.

HOW CAN WE deliver on this obligation? The good news is that much has already been accomplished. America has made impressive strides over the years when it comes to housing. In generations past, the poor crowded into wretched slums, with many apartments lacking toilets, hot water, heat, or windows.²⁵ Death and disease were rampant. Over the generations, the quality of housing improved dramatically. And to address the problem of affordability, bold and effective programs were developed. In the middle part of the twentieth century, housing was at the forefront of the progressive agenda. High-rise housing projects were erected to replace slums, sometimes in a single, massive sweep. "Cutting the ribbon for a new public housing project was an occasion to celebrate," the late housing economist Louis Winnick remembered. "Big-city mayors and aldermen trolled for votes by pledging a towering public housing project for the ward." When public housing residents saw their apartments—all airy and new, nested in complexes surrounded by expansive grassy fields and playgrounds—they were thrilled. "It is a very beautiful place," one said, "like a big hotel resort."²⁶

But soon the great towers erected to replace slums became slums themselves. After politicians choked off funding, public housing fell into a miserable state of disrepair. Broken windows, plumbing, and elevators stayed that way; outside, sewer openings were left uncovered and trash piled up. Families who could move did, leaving behind the city's poorest residents. Soon, public housing complexes descended into chaos and violence. It got to the point where the police refused to go to St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe Towers, which would be demolished in front of a televised audience only eighteen years after the first residents moved in. Across the United States, the wrecking ball and dynamite stick visited other infamous housing projects, such as Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes and Atlanta's McDaniel-Glenn Homes—joyless towers casting shadows over segregated and desolate areas of their cities. Given what the projects had become, blowing them up was not only

the cheaper option; it was the most humane one, like bulldozing a house in which some unspeakable thing had once transpired.²⁷

Out of this rubble, the voucher program sprung to life. Whatever else vouchers were, they were not Pruitt-Igoe or Robert Taylor or all the other public housing complexes that had come to be synonymous with urban violence, bitter poverty, and policy failure. Today, the federally funded Housing Choice Voucher Program helps families secure decent housing units in the private rental market. Serving over 2.1 million households, this program has become the largest housing subsidy program for low-income families in the United States. An additional 1.2 million families live in public housing.²⁸ Cities such as Philadelphia, Seattle, and Oakland have reimagined public housing, often as low-rise, attractive buildings dispersed over several neighborhoods. By and large, both public housing residents and voucher holders pay only 30 percent of their income on rent, with government funds covering the remaining costs.²⁹

Public initiatives that provide low-income families with decent housing they can afford are among the most meaningful and effective anti-poverty programs in America. Not every public housing resident or voucher holder is poor—many are elderly or disabled; others have modest incomes—but every year rental assistance programs lift roughly 2.8 million people out of poverty. These programs reduce homelessness and allow families to devote more resources to health care, transportation—and food.³⁰ When families finally receive housing vouchers after years on the waiting list, the first place many take their freed-up income is to the grocery store. They stock the refrigerator and cupboards. Their children become stronger, less anemic, better nourished.³¹

But the majority of poor families aren't so lucky, and their children—children like Jori, Kendal, and Ruby—are not getting enough food because the rent eats first. In 2013, 1 percent of poor renters lived in rent-controlled units; 15 percent lived in public housing; and 17 percent received a government subsidy, mainly in the form of a rent-reducing voucher. The remaining 67 percent—2 of every 3