

Little Pink House

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By Jamie McGhee

My great-grandmother turned finite space into infinite sanctuary and always found enough room to do whatever she needed.

The shutters on my great-grandmother's little pink house always smelled like seawater; the salt was baked into the wood. My sister and I filled the house with fruit: We plucked plantains from the tree in the backyard, dripped mango juice across the kitchen tiles, and sucked on kenep fruit like jawbreakers. Sticky afternoons found us reading on the porch because it was too hot to stay inside, where a single fan chugged sweaty air. Life was low, and slow, and I loved it. Even though I only visited during summer breaks, my great-grandmother's pink house in Tortola always felt warm in a way my own North Carolina neighborhood never was. It felt like home.

Although her little pink house was tiny, my great-grandmother carved out space for everything: The outdoor shack beside the stone oven wasn't just where she did laundry or grated coconut for her tarts. It was also where the whole church gathered every Saturday to bake a week's worth of bread, and where my dozens of cousins played while the grown folks went to work. Every room served every purpose.

At first glance, its cramped quarters made it the opposite of the infinitely large Obsidian House. The Obsidian House overlooks the San Francisco Bay, while our only view was of rocky banks. Absent a legacy wall that could digitally display generations of history,

my great-grandmother tracked our infinitely expanding family tree in a single yellow binder.

But in a way, that little pink house embodies the same ideals as the Obsidian House. My great-grandmother turned finite space into infinite sanctuary and always found enough room to do whatever she needed. Whether she was watching her soap operas alone or whether half the island was packed inside the kitchen, she could always shrink or grow the house into the perfect size.

Blackness often necessitates a certain type of making-do. It's not often that we as Black people can openly claim abundance or amass the resources to construct our own Obsidian Houses. This project is a chance to dream. For some, the perfect home would be a massive four-storey. For others, a cosy cabin. For still others, something else entirely. The power of this project lies not in the size of the house but rather in the freedom to design and curate one's own space. Instead of making the best of what's been given to us, we are empowered to become makers ourselves.

Three years ago, Hurricane Maria dealt a blow to my great-grandmother's little pink sanctuary when it devastated the Virgin Islands. Families were forced to evacuate the properties they had owned for generations. My aunt, however, who still lives at the house, chose to stay and rebuild. After three long years of construction, the house is still not as it once was: The outdoor shack needs a new roof, the shutters let in rain and the fan is gone. But whenever I call her, she reminds me that the plantain tree in the backyard still bears fruit, and that when she heats up that stone oven, she knows that she's home.



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