

Look Both Ways Before Crossing
by Esther Lucas

It was a warm summer day in Ann Arbor in 1952. A three-year-old version of me was busy playing in the tiny front yard of our house at 1230 White Street. Maybe my new purple and white tricycle was a horse that day, or maybe I was trying to learn crossies with my jump rope, when my mother appeared on the porch steps.



House at 1230 White Street from family photos

“Esther, I need to go to the corner store for some milk and bread. Put your things away and let’s go.”

“I don’t want to go; do I have to?”



Three-year-old me from family photos

A neighbor was in his yard across the street, mowing his lawn. He agreed to keep an eye on me; I could stay home in the front yard! My mother would be back in a few minutes. This was very likely the very first time I had ever been left home “alone.”

The corner store was literally around the corner and across the street. I had walked there with my mother many times. Sometimes we went to the left, and took the longer route, turning two corners before arriving at the corner across the street from the store. Sometimes we went the short way, to the right, around one corner, and crossed to our destination at the end of the block.

I watched my mother as she went to the left. I watched her walk the length of the block, until she disappeared around the corner. Then I went back to playing. After what

seemed like a long time to me, but must have been only a few minutes, I decided that I really wanted to go to the store with my mother. I followed my mother’s path, expecting to catch up with her. But my legs were short, and I imagine that she was trying to hurry. When I crossed the street and went inside of the store, my mother wasn’t there. The familiar woman behind the counter recognized me. “She went that way.” The woman gestured in the direction of the short way home.



Neighborhood map drawn by the author

Again, I crossed the street. I didn’t see my mother, but I continued to follow the path she had taken. Soon, I arrived back home. The neighbor was there, but my mother wasn’t.

“Your mother went to look for you,” he said. “She said to have you stay right here if you got back before her.” His tone was definite. I stayed put.

Before too long – although I can imagine it seemed more like an eternity – my mother appeared. Of course, her search for me had entailed another trip around the block, and another visit to the store, only to be told that I had been there and had already left – “she went that way.”

I wasn’t sure what would happen next. As soon as she arrived, my mother insisted that we walk around to the store AGAIN, so that I could show her how I had gotten there. She was particularly interested in how I had gone about crossing the street.

I remember that she said, “show me how you crossed the street.” I honestly could not remember, but I knew what the rules were. I made sure, this time, anyway, that I looked both ways as I had been taught. She approved. I had passed the test! After that, I was sent to the store by myself with a list of one or two items and money to pay for them. I dutifully looked both ways each time I crossed the street, and came back with the purchases, proud of my mother’s trust. If she continued to follow me, I was never aware of it.