

WINNIPEG STORIES

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STORIES HOUSES TELL

by Ellen Peterson

The speaker is Lillian Gibbons, 89. She is on a boat on the Amazon River near Manaus, Brazil. She struggles to write a letter.

LILLIAN:

I keep starting this. I have to keep starting over. I am having trouble with words.

something has happened

This morning I looked at the book on my nightstand and there were only lines only marks the pages were a blank to me

I can't read. I can manage to write, I think, but I am not sure because I can't read. I don't know what I've said. I don't know if these are words. I jump ahead to the letter after the one I want. I miss whole words. Something seems to be curled inside the shapes, something that may come out, so I hurry past where I am. To keep it inside. It frightens me. Words were always easy.

This morning when I came up on deck I thought I was at home. The river and the green branches hanging down and the heavy hot air. It might be Winnipeg in July. But I know I am on a boat on the Amazon. The name of this boat and the name of the city where we embarked I don't remember.

a slow muddy river. Yesterday a snake, a giant thing

a banister

curved down from the branch of a tree and into the water. It swam away.

in Brazil in the city where the rivers meet. One river is clear and one river is muddy and they go on side by side for miles before they mix and make the new river. The Amazon River. In Winnipeg the rivers seem to meet without any fuss. The Assiniboine gives over to the Red

without a fight. Seamless. But the city never came together so easily. It is an unlikely place for a city.

I'm going to die here on this boat. I am trying to tell you what to do. This is about the apartment on Smith Street. What you are to do. With me. With the things in the apartment.

I wanted to get as far from Smith Street as I could. From the wrecking balls and the jackhammers. When I walk down the streets in Winnipeg now, all I can see is what's no longer there. On Broadway, on Main Street, or in St. John's. The house where the Bannermans danced with the Inksters and the Mathesons. The house where the bishop lived. It used to be the boys' school. The banister snaking down, a perfect slide. They tore the house down to make the graveyard bigger. They buried it.

I was sad to see them go, all torn down now. Because houses were stories to me. To be read wherever I went. The stories houses tell.

A woman who writes is always suspect. A woman who writes for the newspapers is worse. "Oh, she's a character," the others at the Tribune would say. "A real character." I know this means I am odd. So I dressed the part. Good woolen suits in bright colours, and long after the fashion I still wore gloves, hats. You cannot go wrong in a well-tailored suit. Chartreuse or fuchsia.

cornflower sapphire delphinium

To be a character is easier than being a person. A character is in a story, but is not the story. I never wanted to be the story and the apartment on Smith Street won't tell anyone the story curled inside. I never wanted anyone reading me.

There are boxes of papers. In the apartment. It is all the notes for all the stories I wrote for the paper. They should go to the University. They may be of interest. It's a great deal of paper. Three hundred stories take paper to write.

I would go to a house or a building. Many times it was just before the wrecking ball came. And someone, maybe the grandson of the man who built the house would show me over the place, and his wife would give me tea. I wrote everything down.

When they offer a cup of tea you always drink two, or perhaps three. If I wrote three hundred stories about houses, two cups of tea per story,... that's a lot of tea. A river of tea and words. I wrote it all down, for the newspaper. Years ago. I wrote all the stories I could. A lot of paper.

It is easy enough to tell you something happened, but you might not be able to see it. If I show you the house, you can see it. The cupboard under the stairs where the bottles were kept. The

window where they watched for the soldiers to come. The tree in the yard where the preacher stood. It was here that the bride came down the stairs and there that the Doctor was arrested and if the house is gone it is hardly the same to go to a parking lot, to go to one of these new office blocks and say: this is where the mother hid the children until the robbers had gone. This is where Louis Riel decided. And this is where they laid him.

the dark windows the faded wallpaper with yellow roses

lonely coat hangers in the chimney cupboards

the motto carved in the mantel: All's for the best.

In Winnipeg the streets are paved with ghosts. So I thought I would get as far away I could. How odd to come such a long way to find it's all the same. The green trees at the river bank and the hot heavy air, the insects fat with blood. They built a city here too, when they came from Europe, with mansions and banks and a palace for a theatre.

a magnificent palace

but the jackhammers and the wrecking balls are everywhere. Tick tock. The theatre will go. They tear everything down. It's like burning books to me.

This is where she baked the cake this is where they danced the jig this is where she died. This is where she dies.

My lawyer will have to handle everything. There isn't anyone else.

The stock certificates may surprise people. No one will even think to look for anything of the kind. They are in a hatbox in the closet. It's a great deal of money. It was easy to do. It isn't difficult. You have to study, and be alert, and watch the timing and you have to be sensible. I never spent money on foolishness. There is almost a half million dollars to go to the charities and there is a list.

The suits go to the needy. Those are good quality suits and will last some poor woman a long time.

magenta and celadon and teal

What have I said? On the pages it looks like the lines an insect makes in the trunk of a tree. A cipher. I don't know what I've said or which stories I've told or which house is talking to me now.

there's rooms in my head

I go through a room and inside that room I see another room. A door has another door in it. Or if you opened a door a split second sooner or later you would find a different room. When you close the door the room goes back into the past

Or if a dog barks or if there's music or if you knew the magic word the room would be whatever room you wanted instead of whatever room it was

Of course they're not like that. The rooms are what they are and they stay what they are.

They have to fall eventually. They have to fall. The time comes you have to give it up. Let the rivers mix. What was clear is all becoming muddy. The boys' school will be buried without a marker in the graveyard and the theatre will crash to the ground. It will sound like applause, won't it? And they will build something else.

Does it matter? what happens to the building if we save the story. The frame is only a place for a life to happen, a lifespan. A box for an idea to live in. An idea about how to live in this unlikely place.

No one wants a thirty-seven room mansion now. Things end. Save what is of use, what is beautiful. Suits. Houses. Stories.

I can barely see to type this. I don't even know if I'm putting down words. Or a pile of rubble, broken bricks. But in the end. Hurry now.

things outlive their usefulness

When the end comes, throw me over the side. Just throw me over the side.

I know you won't do it. It's my wish, and even though I know you won't do it I'll keep wishing it. Even though I know you will put me on ice and fly me home. And they'll dress me in one of my suits and say the words over me. Something else will rise. Someone else will live in the apartment on Smith Street. Someone else will walk down Broadway and see what isn't there. But they will only see it because I told it. Only because I read the houses, before the houses fell.