

## WINNIPEG STORIES

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### THE GREEN BUILDING

by Liam Zarrillo

Dog were the days of summer. Smoke was the weather forecast. Forests fighting fires sparked by a climate crisis sparked by us.

I remember that smoke was in *my* forecast. Each cigarette I spat into the air was like a handwritten letter.

“This building is a hazard. Your choices are to have it demolished. Or we will demolish it for you. And send you the bill. Signed, The City.” At least that’s how I remember it. Maybe I’m paraphrasing.

But I do know I was sitting on my crooked porch. Staring out into a hazy neighborhood that didn’t care about my new haircut. About my irrevocable idealism.

I remember smashing my cigarette into the ashtray. Sending ash flying upwards, seeing it land on foggy glass. I pulled the frames from my face, enlisted a sweaty cotton t-shirt to battle the oily smudges. Resulting in more smear than shine.

Through marginally clearer lenses, I remember focusing my blind eyes on roads that were an indication of how The City really feels about a neighborhood. You can always tell how a city feels about a neighborhood by the state of its roads. Cities tell stories. And in this case, the story being told was about turning a blind eye.

Landing here was like landing on the moon, so to speak. It was wise to brace yourself. Smart to prepare for a terrain made up of cracks and craters. Dodge or dive in were your two options. Most days I chose the former. Some days I chose both.

Once, I chose the latter.

I had a vision. The kind of thing that came from years of living by the code of possibility. Reminiscent of my days designing revolutions in warmly lit basement apartments. Drinking flats of warm cans of Lucky on cold November nights. Making warmth with her in bed. The kind of stuff that drove the cold from your bones. That could bring you to life.

It's remarkable what a coat of paint can do. How a particular color can affect a thing's beauty. What my eyes lacked in acute vision they made up for in ruthless imagination. I saw beyond the lime green. My mind's eye could strip away the nauseating layers, revealing something... Revealing real potential.

During that time I was swallowing beer bottles as rigorously as a catholic church trying to turn everything they could into stained glass. Well intended, certainly.

I wanted to make something.

I remember this photograph. A grainy, black and white portrait of a family. Two young girls and two young boys poised in front of their young parents. They stand among the olive trees in the field behind their home, their faces squinting into the sun. Harnessing the strength to go. The kind it takes to leave, to arrive. The story of that place is told in many ways. Memories passed along the grapevine, details shifting slightly as they are transferred from mouths to ears. And yet somehow, one particular detail had always been left out of the story. Despite its size, its grit, its desperation... that place is... beautiful. But no one seemed to notice. Or maybe that's just not how they remember it. Can you remember the first time you realized something you had known your entire life?

I smashed the photograph into the ashtray. Ignoring the miniature explosions of ash around me, I had found the resolve to make a move.

When a building is your body, it's no surprise for it to be subject to human neglect. Life

happens, foundations can be rocked. It's not until you realize you've shut out the rest of the world that, actually, it's too late. The crack that caused the jam has started to spread. Suddenly all you have inside of you is five worn fingers, curled into a tight fist, trying desperately to hold everything together.

I remember approaching the building. I remember the people. What I can't remember, though, is their eyes. I've invented a memory where their eyes are sad and wet and empty. But I think it's impossible for me to remember something I didn't see. I remember refusing to lock eyes with anyone. As if avoiding their gaze would help me escape a situation that was already my reality.

This here is the part where everything let go. As the wrecking ball collided with the building, for a moment, that whole intersection was pulled apart. Like a fist through the wall, brick by brick, folk by folk, corner by corner, life by life, finger by finger my clenched fist uncurled and fell limp.

There was nothing left for someone like me to hold together. Just piles of everything that was left. The bricks and the folks and their lives on the corners. Not my job to clean up the debris. It wasn't my responsibility anymore. Probably it never was.

I shoved that uncurled hand into my back pocket and dug out a smoke.

This cigarette, spat into the air, was a handwritten poem.

The wind was blowing  
So wild I couldn't see  
So I shaved my head down to its skull  
In an effort to eradicate every follicle  
To make sense of what was right in front of me

The goal was to find new heights  
Solid ground

To firmly plant myself on clean, cool concrete  
Instead of city sidewalks  
Cracked and crumbling beneath my feet

I couldn't see the vibrant tile  
For the crumble  
Couldn't hear the beauty in blazing heat  
For the volcano's erupting rumble

Clean, cool concrete will always crack  
Nothing lasts  
I was only ever meant  
To burn my city down

*End.*