

Title:

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*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



The Story of a Building

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It was only by chance that they had chosen the same day, the same time, the same factory to visit. The two women - one Black, one white, both now middle aged - decided to go back to the same place, at the same moment, in the aftermath of the Detroit flood of 2199.

The city had flooded again that summer. This time more catastrophic than the last. And the last had knocked the city senseless. Late August, the rains had poured on without end. Basements filled with water, electric cars at a standstill. Roads - built high up off the ground like networks of intertwined bridges - were even now impassable. That's when the old transportation ways came out. Canoes, kayaks. Together, these fleets navigated the twists and turns of the wetlands that Detroit had always been. And still was. Sometimes you could even see paddle boarders out there. No longer a hobby; now on the worst days, it was the best way to move around.

Both women lived in more modern parts of the city, far from the Detroit River that had once been their childhoods. From their balconies at the tops of skyscrapers - built up higher and higher off the perpetually soft mostly soggy grounds - they watched the city change down below from their spaces high above the earth. The migrants - called climate crisis victims now - came to the city seeking a reprieve from the violent eruptions happening on every continent around the globe. But the crisis was here too in their motor city. Especially on days that it rained.

This place that they were visiting - the plant - was the one that had made up the stories of the fathers of the fathers of the fathers of the fathers they had called their own.

It wasn't the Coliseum or the Great Wall of China, but it was an ancient ruin all the same.

The Factory stood at 6600 Lynch Road and had been owned by a car company of long ago - back when cars ran on fossil fuels rather than the electric power of today. Back before most highways were automated, and before the floods threatened to engulf their everyday lives.

When it rained, even just a little...Did you get an alert? Another flood watch? What zone are you in? Blue. Still safe then.

The factory had been built long before the sign of rain turned into a shudder, a chilling reminder of all of the floods before.

The Lynch Road factory had been the place where their people had worked, these two women. This place had been the one that had pushed their family out of poverty over two hundred years ago and into the sparkling upper middle classes of America. They should have been grateful.

Mara was Polish on her father's side - maybe Kashubian, but who knew what that word meant anymore. Just a word passed down from one generation to another, without any language to sound it out, or any culture to give it meaning. She didn't even bother to say it anymore.

The family had settled in Poletown in the late 1870s, or so their story went.

Working class. Poor. But still white in a city of migrants. And that meant something then. Meant everything really.

One generation (so many great-great grandfathers back, it was hard to remember now), one of the men had gotten a job at the Lynch Plant. Well, he didn't get the job on his own exactly. His father worked there too - by then a trained electrician, protected by the trade unions. A legacy job then. Or it would have been, had his son stayed on to work on the line. This would have been the 1970s. Pre-OSHA (who believed in that anymore), pre-Cancer (wasn't it coming for us all anyways?), pre-everything (if they had only known what was coming).

Kelani's family had come up north by way of Atlanta in the late 1960s. Her great, great, great, great, great grandfather (she *did* know the exact amount of greats; they didn't work like that for her not to remember them, her mama had scolded) had started working at the Lynch plant around the same time.

Not as high up. That much went without saying. The Black workers worked the worst jobs - you knew that going in. Had to know that going in. And you felt that difference from day one. The worst machines, dirtiest floor, most infected air. You might walk in breathing okay, but you'd leave with another thing caught up inside you, lodged within your chest, only to come out later as the C-word, or maybe worse. There *was* always worse.

The story had been passed on to both of them in much the same way.

Mara's ancestor - the son - started working there as a young kid. Danny was white, and his father had gotten him and his younger brother, Joe, good jobs one summer on the line.

His dad had gone every day to this place since before they could remember. He took off switches, cleaned them with oil and chemicals (no one could ever pronounce the names right), and replaced them back on the line that was still running - always running. Take off, clean, replace, go. Take off, clean, replace, go. And again. And again. They didn't wear masks for the chemicals back then, just breathed in whatever was there. Didn't ask questions. Came in, did their jobs. Never called in sick one time.

By the time his father got his journeyman's card, the speedups had begun. The company stopped investing in the inner-city plants that were breaking down one by one, running on broken machines above capacity, working to get everyone in the goddamn country a car. The speedups hurt everyone, but anyone using their hands on machines at work, was losing the battle. In Detroit, you knew the workers by their hands. One finger gone was okay, but two...your time was up. Hands and fingers got caught; maimed bodies were pulled along the line. No time to stop the line - you could never stop the line - so sacrifices had to be made. You had to know your sacrifice before you started. What were you willing to give up for work?

Once, his father got electrocuted. The shock fused together the two smallest fingers of his left hand, bending them permanently. But he was lucky compared to the others. There were some that never left that place at all. Some that never came back. Danny's father at least had retired with all his fingers.

Still, the guys on the line joked that a man walked into the foundry, and walked out with ten years left to live. You had to laugh at jokes like that, but later you got to thinking. Unless you lived on the line, you didn't know.

Danny had taken the job to pay for college downtown. Danny and Joe were the kind that could have gone either way. To the factories for life (or death or retirement at 65), or to college. They'd have to work for it, but things were changing then, and there was a chance for white guys from the working classes. There were always chances for them. Life didn't have to be miserable. Or could be less miserable, anyways.

But Danny knew on day one he wouldn't be there long. The plant was dirty, the floor littered with sheet metals, and jagged scraps waiting to slice your hand open. And you couldn't see them, but you knew the chemicals were there. You breathed in, and knew every time you inhaled they had to be there too. Was there any real air in there? The place was loud, machinery in a constant battle with hands, constantly blasting out deafening, jarring booms that echoed back and forth, bouncing off one another, and into their ears. It was a forever rumble of grinding and grating that came to define real work.

The work was boring. He was so bored in fact that he started taking a transistor radio onto the job. He'd built it himself - tucking speakers into the ear protectors they had to wear that were supposed to keep the grinding and booming of the plant floor out of their ears. He pulled the wire

through his collar, down his shirt, and wrapped it around his belt. Turned the radio on, twisted the dials to WRIF.

It was against the rules of course, but he never stopped the line and was good at what he did, so he never got in trouble. The chain-smoking foreman always had something to say, but Danny would just nod, as if he could hear a goddamned real noise in this place.

Danny had made the decision before he started. Work just enough to pay for school, he thought, then I'm out. So he and Joe went every day to work that summer, noon shift to 2am. Double pay on Sundays. They needed that money too. But by shift's end, their fingers were clenched together, and they ached through their whole bodies. Their fingers stayed clenched on the way home, through a heat up meal of roast beef, steamed carrots, and potatoes waiting for them, and still clenched through the nights. By morning, their hands would finally unclench enough to drink their coffees. Black, no cream, no sugar. And then soon it was back to the plant again. They would sometimes pass their father on their way into the factory: them walking into work, he walking out, after the early morning shift. "Boys," their father would say, gruffly, barely stopping to talk.

Danny could see how what his dad went through, how tired he was by the time he got home. And he'd been doing that now for twenty years. Dad thought it was nuts to take a college career, to be an accountant. "You'll make more money on the line," he reminded them. What good was it watching other people make money? The money wasn't out there. It was in the factories.

One day, the guy that worked opposite Danny on input fell into a vat of chemicals. Straight fell in, submerged in god knows what. The guy had been standing on the edge of the thing, trying to fix a part, all the time the line not stopping, lost his footing, and fell in. The chemicals didn't even bubble up like water did when you fell in. They just continued swirling. They couldn't even find his body in there.

That day, Danny decided he was never coming back. He'd quit first before he made it to that guy's job. It was his first and last summer working there, and his last shop job ever. He left, Joe and his father stayed. He graduated college, Joe got cancer, and Dad died at 76.

On the last day at the factory, amid the smoke and the dirt and the darkness, Danny took off the transistor radio blasting Peter Frampton, and handed it to the new kid. Marcus. Up from Atlanta with his family. It was cold as hell, but the factory work was up here, so that's where they went.

Marcus let out a big grin, nodded, and turned on the radio, changed the dials. Settled on some Johnnie Taylor, and got to work.

Marcus' father had fought in WWII, and that was supposed to be the family ticket to the real America. They'd lived in the country their whole lives, man, but it still never felt like home. The war was supposed to be the final test. If you offer to give your life for a country, don't they owe you better? What more was there left to give? But that had been another promise broken.

For Marcus though, heading north was a fresh start. And he wasn't the only one. Lots of people he knew were already up there. Come on, man, they would say, the money is up here. It shocked the whites of course, so they still kept away. Still had their own neighborhoods and shit. Still scared of god knows what. He just wanted his money, his chance. He didn't want to be there long either.

Especially not with the kind of work they gave him, fresh blood on the shop floor. They were younger, the Black guys that showed up for work on the line. No seniority. Really starting from the bottom. No one to tell them the rules - written and unwritten - at the plant.

The Lynch Plant was a good spot to be in though, really. Compared to Dodge Main, Chrysler Main, or some of the other places. Almost half the guys over there were Black. Everyone there worked in the forges. Duce work, spray paint, body work. The whites knew that work killed. And they knew it wasn't secure. That's why they put 'em up in there in the first place. And they could let 'em go anytime they wanted.

There was one guy at the Lynch Plant though, a quiet older guy. They offered him foreman, but he didn't take it. Didn't want to play up to the bosses like that. Worked as an electrician on the line, and had the hands to prove it. Two fingers fused together by a shock, crooked and stuck together. Marcus had learned early on not to look down. Not to stare. Ask no questions.

But this guy sometimes would stay a little after his shift. He'd take out his cameras. Some regular ones, but others too. Different kinds, fancy ones. He'd asked all the guys in the break room (Black and white, they still shared that space, even if they each had their corners) if he could take some photos. The electrician was reading books, teaching himself, learning photography. Marcus didn't get how he found the time. But sure, man, do what you gotta do. Marcus had his stuff too. Books and poetry and art. He wrote in his pocket notebook sometimes. Just words he liked, or phrases he wanted to remember. Never knew, maybe he'd write something one day too. Sometimes he would even meddle with tunes, to match the words. Maybe he'd do that one day too. He had

some things to say, moving South to North on the roads in this country. He'd write that maybe, and other things too. Some kind of wonderful. Sam Cooke was his favorite. Always. *Bring it on home...*

So sure, why not? Marcus and the guys let the electrician take their photos. Goofing around, card games, a little gambling on the side. Sometimes they even smiled.

He didn't know what the guy would do with the photos, but maybe one day someone would see them, and think about these guys, here on the factory floor. They weren't anyone special maybe, but they made the cars that ran this country.

Marcus saw the guy fall into the chemical vat that day too. It was sad, sure. Shocking. But down South in this country, he'd seen other things. Eyes bulged, tongues left to dry out. Maybe chemicals weren't a bad way to go, considering.

Still, he wanted to get out of there as soon as he could. Move onto another job, away from the dust, maybe outside, where the air was real. But until then, he'd have to keep working.

Some young guy did leave shortly after that day though. Smart guy, kept to himself. On the day he left, he didn't say goodbye to anyone. But he did come over to Marcus, not sure why.

Why is he coming over here, Marcus muttered to himself.

Some people said, "not all white people are bad people," but Muhammed Ali said it best. When he was on that *Parkinson* show a few years ago, something like...if 10,000 rattlesnakes were coming at you, and you knew that just 1,000 wouldn't bite you, 1,000 meant right, would you stay there and wait and see, or just close the door and stay safe?

"Hey, man. You want this?" the guy said, standing right next to him.

Marcus glanced at the kid sideways. Tall, scrawny. Not too much older than he was. This white guy thought he wanted a handout. He didn't come all this way north, to get that kind of treatment.

The young guy held out an old transistor radio. Homemade. Showed him how to tuck it under the overalls, so the foreman wouldn't notice. "Just do a good job, and they can't say anything. Don't stop the line, and you're good."

Marcus nodded, grinned. It was a real grin, not the fake one he gave to most white people. To make them feel good about themselves.

"Thanks," he said. He'd be stupid to say no. It would make the working more livable, at least.

Marcus never left the plant. He worked until retirement, knew how to save, and they had enough for a little plot, a real house, where the grandkids could come visit. But he didn't get much time there, even in his own house.

They said he died young. But all the guys on the line died young back then, so it seemed natural. But Marcus knew, even in the dying, that it had been the chemicals all along.

It took Kelani's people two more generations at least to get themselves to the cherished upper middle class of the country. But by then, the floods had come, and the fires too. But her people still celebrated. They had made it, through everything. And they could still feel everything, remember it - deep inside their bones.

Two hundred years to freedom and two hundred more to the top. *Started from the bottom now we* - wasn't that the line from the old rapper that her dad used to sing? She couldn't remember. It was music from another time, another era. One that looked nothing like the world of floods and fires and sinking coastlines and food shortages and heat waves and lead in water and, and, and...

Started from the bottom now we

But anyways now they were here.

When the two women saw one another here, now, in front of where the plant had stood, Mara gave a slight nod. Kelani nodded back, but turned to the empty field in front of them, placing her hands on the chain link fence that kept them out, staring. Please white girl don't talk to me, she whispered to herself. I just want to be alone here. She could see the woman had brought her electric bike. A new model. Generational wealth built on her generations, and it pissed her off. Do. Not. Talk. To. Me.

Oh god, here she comes. How did that Ali quote about white people and snakes go again? The words weren't there, but yeah. That's what she felt. Close the door.

"Crazy, right? To see it like this?" Mara asked, walking over next to Kelani, gesturing to the open field in front of them.

"Yeah." Kelani pulled away, stared straight ahead.

"It's crazy that they finally sold it, after all these years of nothing. Looks like they're finally going to build something."

Kelani nodded. Maybe if she stopped responding, this girl would go away.

"Did your family work here too?" Mara asked, gesturing to the stark open fields before them, behind the fence.

A sign powered by solar blared before them, FOR SALE. A phone number, a big name Detroit developer, a greenie. A line slashed through the moving sign, and colorful graffiti permanently declared: GO BACK TO L.A.

Or better yet, go to the moon, Kelani thought to herself.

And maybe these guys already had. The building had sold, but the land was still vacant. The last remnants of industrial ruin still sat there, and from the looks of things, untouched.

A promise. Broken?

“Hey, can I show you something?” Mara asked, gesturing to her purse.

Oh god, Kelani thought. Always have to watch out for the crazy ones. Don’t engage, don’t engage, don’t engage -

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Mara continued.

“Sure,” Kelani said, almost grumbling. Always better to play nice with the wackos.

Mara opened up her purse, and took out a small box.

It was faded - yellow and red with the words King Edwards Imperial almost entirely scratched off. America’s Mildest Cigar. 7 cents. The box had old lines of tape across it, from where it had once been taped shut. It opened up now, repurposed into storage, but the tape lines were still there. It had the look of a thing that had been passed around and around for years, but had never been held onto, not really. A look that said, this is important, this is history, so keep it, but also - what is it for?

Mara opened up the box now, and took out a stack of black and white photos.

“Here, take a look. Someone in my family took these, a long time ago. 1970s, when my family first worked here.”

“Yeah, cool,” Kelani said sarcastically, still staring ahead. But she still side-eyed the photos.

“Here, take a look,” Mara insisted. “When did you say your family was here?”

I didn’t say, Kalani almost whispered under her breath.

“Same time,” she said, finally.

Mara held out the photos, insistent.

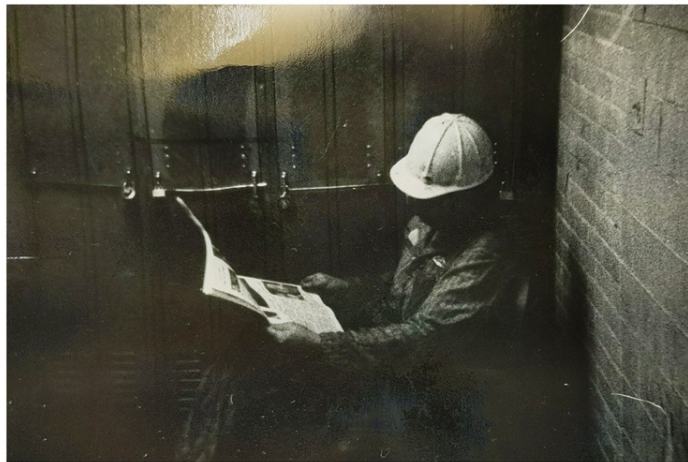


PhotoScan by Google Photos

Untitled by Roy Hoin. Image property of author.

Kelani grabbed a stack, began to rifle through them. Black and white buildings, train tracks, machinery. Lots of smoke and soot and darkness. Some people. White. Doubt there are any Black people in these shots, she thought to herself. Kelani only had one good photo of her ancestor, Marcus, but the photo was so faded, you could hardly see anything.

And then.



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Kelani gasped. It was someone she thought she knew. Same smile as her daddy. Could barely see the full outline of the guy in the photo, but he was there.

Kelani pointed to the photo, “There. That might be someone.”

Mara smiled, handed her more photos.



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The women were quiet then, shuffling through the photos of so long ago. Taken in the exact space they stood. Over 200 years ago. Photos like these didn't exist today. Maybe in museums, but even those were starting to fade. Everything was kept in the air now. The ether. Which was really nowhere at all, when you thought about it. Did it ever even happen?

But now, of course, the plant was gone, save for a few pieces of the structure left standing; island ruins adrift in the vacant field. The land was green again. The darkness of the photos seemed impossible when looking out at the land in front of them. It looked wild, in a way that something could only be wild in the city. Tinged with some kind of they didn't know what - but something that made it less green somehow, and more human.

"Imagine," Kelani whispered, drawing a little closer to Mara now. "Our people worked here."

"Yeah," Mara whispered back, nodding. "But you wouldn't know that just by looking at it."

"No. No, you wouldn't."

The two women looked at the pictures, looked at the sign, looked out at the field.

In a few years perhaps the land would be built up, and then torn down, and sold again.

They looked back down at the photos.



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And here is how you tell the story of a Building.

The promise.

The waiting.

The broken promise(s).

The waiting.

The approval of the Building.

The approval (or not) of the community.

The Building happens anyways.

More promises.

Maybe even a tax break, depending on where they decide to build the Building.

The factory comes next. No matter what names they use for it now - center, campus, project
- it is still just a factory at heart.

Next: the naming of the Building.

The ceremony for the Building.

The news reports about the Building.

And then the workers come.

They start the working, working, working.

Maybe more building of the Building.

But always the working.

Until the place can't be worked anymore.

Not the people of course, or even the land itself.

They can always work.

They are always there for the working.

But one day the Building can't take it anymore. It just gives out. Slowly breaks down, rusts, settles into the ground. And begins its quiet descent into decay.

A sigh.

One moment to remember.

And then...

The waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Decay, decay, decay.

The perverse quiet as the neighborhood kids eye the abandoned place with mutual curiosity and terror.

What is that thing?

What can we make it?

It is the fort of imaginations.

The house of hauntings.

The future of neighborhoods.

Or just an eyesore that stays.

Stays, stays, stays.

And then, one day, maybe someone else imagines another story for the Building.

And they tear it down hoping to retell the story, but this time an entirely different story. Or in a different way. One that will last. A better story. One for all time. One of the greats.

But it never is, of course.

It's the same old story.

It's the same Building.

~

Even now, as Mara and Kelani peer out at the place, they can see the vestiges of the old stories amidst the tall grasses and endless wide fields behind the fence that keeps them out.

The wind comes then. Caresses their faces, whips through them. It moves through their bodies, sends shivers up their spines, and then drifts out onto the field, wrapping itself around the ruins. It is the same wind as before, the same wind of always. Will they tear these ruins down? Build another building? Will there be another flood? What will they do when the city is underwater? What then? Will anyone remember? Can we imagine something different?

These are the ruins of the city.

Except they are not ruins at all.

This is the place where their families worked. Where one day their people decided to do something for their children and their children's children and all the children that would follow after that they would never even know. They dreamed of making their living just a little bit better. After all, even a little bit could make the living better. Not like the rich ones. But the kind of lives that were okay with just being enough. Enough to live by, enough to eat by, enough to walk around in freedom and feel a breeze of cool air hit your face across the great lakes of the earth, and listen to the sounds of birds, and live completely in a life that is full of being just enough.

Maybe their people even wished that one day they - the children of the children of the children of the children who had worked here - might look in on this place. And if not this place exactly, at least the photos of what it had once been.

And they could remember. Maybe, even, these children of the children of the children of the children who had worked here, would dare to hope that things could be different for the ones that came after.

Maybe they would see that the story of the building was them, and that the ruins were too. And even in the tearing down, they were there. All of them.

Après moi le déluge. After me, the flood.

No. After us, more of us.

The world does not end.

The sooty images in black and white that the two women stared at now did not lie. Anyone looking at them could see that working there had been unsafe, unsustainable, dangerous. The chemicals practically oozed out from the frame.



PhotoScan by Google Photos

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How could anyone work there and come out alive? How could anyone work anywhere like this, and tell the story?

So it was no surprise that Mara and Kelani shared that part of their story too. The cancers and the coughs and the early deaths of the fathers and the mothers who worked here or in other places just like this, until it hurt so much just to get their lungs to breathe. Until there wasn't any more space for the real air to fit inside.

Together, Kelani and Mara talked of these stories, and the slow violences that had swallowed their families up whole. They stayed there a long time, just talking. It felt good to share life stories. Even if they were different. Even if they weren't about life at all.

“Well, I guess there's always Mars,” Kelani joked.

“Yeah, ha,” Mara laughed.

It was true. The top leaders said it all the time. If things got too bad down here on Earth, they could always shoot up to space. Some people were already up there now, amassing new fortunes, carving new kinds of spaces, building buildings.

But who would go first? Kelani often wondered. It wouldn't surprise her if her people got screwed over on Mars too. History had taught her too well not to think otherwise.

And what would happen to the ones left down here? Mara wondered. Would we ever come back for them? No. Would they ever come back for us?

“I wouldn’t go,” Mara said, at last.

“You mean you’d miss all this?” Kelani laughed, gesturing to the city and the ruins and the lands damaged by the flooding, but still fresh from that day’s morning dew.

And then, Kelani nodded. To Mara, to the photos, to the field that had once been factory: “Yeah. I wouldn’t go either. I wouldn’t want to leave them here. Alone.”

They had just met, and would never meet again. But it was decided then, without saying. They, like the ruins of work, and the workers that worked them, would stay here. In Detroit. As relentless reminders of history, of humans, of ruins, of what they built, and what they tore down. Reminders of so much building up and tearing down even when the land itself had begged for a rest.

Stop. Breathe. Wait.

Please wait.

Just one moment.

One moment more.

Remember when all of this was trees?

One moment.

Please.

To remember.

No, they would not go. They would stay - living and working amidst the ruins if they had to. Among the floods and the rains and the hurricanes and the droughts and the famines. They might even teach themselves to walk through the fires.

And then: they would learn to live with the ashes.

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