

BUILDING MEMORIES

BY

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I grew up in a small town. It was an unpretentious town that never learned how to act. Perhaps the gossip and the neighbors' ears kept everyone honest. Once, I remember, the police conveniently appeared where some of us guys were ready to ignite firecrackers behind the school one unseasonably warm spring afternoon. Apparently we had been overheard deciding to torment gophers on the pockmarked ball diamonds with our newly imported cache. Consequently the crime was never committed. It was a small town.

I wasn't born in Town. My parents uprooted my brother and me, and moved us there when I was seven years old. The reason being that the summer prior to my eighth birthday, the company my father worked for transferred him to manage a local plant. Town looked like a cozy place to live, so we found some property overlooking a nearby lake and settled into the district. I don't remember much about the city, but I grew up in Town.

My family and our opulent new house were a mystery to everyone. We were reasonably affluent by any standard, and with all the landscaping needed on our new property we kept more to ourselves than was seemly to the townsfolk, who had no such concerns. Mostly they regarded us with hesitation. Newcomers, after all, were disruptive and untrustworthy.

It was an interesting place. Main street dawdled clumsily across the railroad bed – tripping over both sets of tracks – went six blocks and reached the other end of town. There it married the highway and they rolled off together into the western skies for a prairie honeymoon. Another highway lazily crossed these two on its southbound journey to the Gulf of Mexico. Like the senior citizens that gave it purpose, the road was in no great hurry. The three of them created a wedge that formed the heart of Town; I called it the "Rhubarb Pie."

Other streets, imaginatively numbered from East to West, ran away from Main Street yet were unable to break free of the gravity that held them fast. They were small tributaries that deteriorated from pavement to dirt when they strayed too far from Main Street. They were crossed by even lesser avenues, creating an incipient urban grid. Never minding all that, the action was on Main Street. Sometimes it was necessary to leave Main Street – or worse, go outside the Rhubarb Pie – but everyone came back for something eventually. Always back to Main Street; nothing ever changed.

Main Street was wrapped in several generations of buildings; old, stone and mortar buildings spawned pre-fabricated metal structures. With due respect for age and wisdom, the elders never lost their hold on Town. The new buildings, having survived only a few harsh winters and dusty summers, and neither depression nor dust bowl, would be second in line until the weather worn buildings toppled over. Such was every building's fate, to live in the shadow of age.

The latest incarnation for the oldest building in Town was as the General Store. It had been renovated and restructured, painted and polished, loved and hated by each successive occupant, but never put down to make space for a modern edifice. "Plenty of good years left in her," the townsfolk said. "Too big a part of our heritage to remove."

I secretly believed that the building kept secrets and that violating her would unlock a Pandora's box of heinous tales. So many owners and tenants had passed through her doors that her real history had become more folklore than fact, and maybe that's all for the best. There are many things to learn from an old building, but just as many things it keeps inside should never be revealed lest they do damage.

Next door, shoulder to shoulder with the General Store, stood a building about half her age. The bricks, once a vibrant terra cotta, were already pale and worn. This building had a special stature in Town because it was the New Town Hall. Fifty years old and still the *New* Town Hall in deference to his predecessor that fell victim to one of the more notorious uses of dynamite in the area's history.

Some buildings are accepted even before the first spade of sod is turned, while others must be grown into. The New Town Hall was part of the family from the start. Everyone in Town felt quite comfortable sidestepping and forgiving it the decaying foyer floor that had swallowed more than one unsuspecting visitor's leg. As an important part of Town, the townsfolk gave the New Town Hall the same respect they would give a new doctor.

On the other side of the General Store was a crisp new building, complete with glass and steel facade, especially built for the *Royal Bank of Canada*. The well-lit gold on blue lion outshone the painted plywood, and brass engraved name-plates of the other two buildings on this part of the block. When this new building was built eight years ago, they were able to reduce the space between it and the General Store to inches. Then the schism was sealed over with mortar so that the bank looked like a growth out of the side of the General Store.

These two buildings stood solidly, coexisting among restaurants, liquor and grocery stores, schools, and farm implement dealerships. But they refused to come together; inches would always separate them. Even as years passed and the bank became a fixture at the corner of Main and Second, nobody ever suggested it was anything more than the *new* building *next* to the General Store.

There were two real hubs in Town: the General Store, aging bastion of the undying history of the pioneer spirit, and the Pool Hall. The Pool Hall was campier and a rough trade. The perfect foil to the General Store's hominess. There was no love lost between them, but they needed each other to maintain Town's precarious balance.

The Pool Hall was a hub inasmuch as it looked after the younger part of Town. There was no age restriction, only the bounds of good sense and understanding kept the very young children on the

street side of its thick door. In the suitably dark and hazy atmosphere of secrets, the Pool Hall inculcated Town's values and then graduated its patrons to the General Store.

For more than sixty years the same basement was appointed in the same raggy drapes and pastel green paint. With the exception of the vividly colored balls clicking on six well-worn, moss green, twelve foot tables, and the flickering from the pinball machines, the place was dull as its patrons. Most of the time they would be wearing leather or denim and dark plaid shirts – or to attract more attention, high contrast white T-shirts bearing a colorful, and usually obscene decal.

Most of nature is a struggle, and in the Pool Hall the natural order of the generation emerged. A Darwinian system emanating from the Pool Hall and encompassing every aspect of Town life ranked the children in relative order of physical and mental (more physical than mental) ability. Serious damage – like death or dismemberment – was infrequent, but there were always fights. A knife with a locking blade was a sensible personal effect, at the very least for show.

Unlike what one might expect in the dark cloister of this underground playpen, it was not restricted to the "bad element." There were not many other easily accessed, anti-scholastic outlets for pent up aggression and hormonal imbalance. Thus, with few exceptions, almost every teenager in Town was a patron at some time. In that respect the Pool Hall was probably the least prejudiced building in Town.

Every Town denizen unflinchingly took the Pool Hall's tutelage with him, in lesser or greater degrees, upon graduation from its dingy classroom. It would prepare them for the eventual chore of being adults in Town. Being an adult in Town carried with it responsibility to uphold strict codes and practises. It demanded adherence to unnatural rituals, and was thus put off as long as possible by remaining in the Pool Hall. Sooner or later, however, it was time to leave. Most of the graduands weren't pulled out of the Pool Hall by the desire to be adults as much as the younger patrons pushed them out.

For the most part, once gone from the Pool Hall, the General Store patrons only returned to see whether the place was still the same and whether their own youngsters were there. Both the Pool Hall and the folks were searching for approval and ensuring continuity. Perhaps there was even a wistful desire, on both parts, to go back to the comfortable way it used to be. That, unfortunately, could never be because time trampled both of them under its heel.

Everyone went to the General Store. The older people would meet their friends and talk about the "latest," or relive long past glories. Often the townsfolk would spend hours in the comfort of the store gossiping and griping. Time lost meaning and passed unnoticed inside the store. The General Store gripped one and all, drawing them back like a magnet; it had its own gravity.

There was even a regular rotation with some people leaving the conversation after adding their wisdom, and others dropping in to hear or be heard. The chattering magpies stopped only when a foreign element came onto the scene. A lost tourist, distant family not recognized, one of Town's own outcasts – suffering for some atrocity, would each incur scornful silence from the General Store and its patrons.

Even more than to the General Store, everyone went to and queued up inside the *Royal Bank* building. It was the only bank in Town, and for the privilege of chequing or borrowing the folk succumbed to progress and grudgingly walked into the lion's den. Once inside this orderly building, uncalled for chit-chat ceased. Unease, they say, is sensed by wild animals; to the lion there was a palpable stench. Business was in order, caution was the rule, and personal talk was saved for the General Store, who's worn out furniture appreciated it more.

There were other places that were required and desired to complement Town's needs, but didn't rank highly enough to be included in the Rhubarb Pie. With the exception of the Arena, which was a social hub in its own right, primarily working buildings were not part of the Rhubarb Pie. Even churches, at one time every community's soul, were outside.

There were churches of every denomination in Town: Catholic, a variety of Protestant, Ukrainian Orthodox, and a host of others. Only a synagogue and a mosque were missing, which was unsurprising in white, rural, redneck Town. Most of these seven holy stations stood along the highways that bordered the Rhubarb Pie, separated from the heart of Town by two thorn-filled ditches and thirty feet of asphalt.

On Sunday, the churches overwhelmed the Rhubarb Pie with Psalms and exhortations of piety and repentance. Some sixty odd days each year the churches overpowered the General Store and Pool Hall. The obvious reason was that these other buildings took a day of rest while the churches worked. The less obvious, and more likely reason is that the churches cleansed Town of its grime so everyone could feel at ease in their filth. But they were, for all that, outside daily life.

The Arena, in spite of being a hive of social activity, was quiet. The trophy cases spoke only of hockey and figure skating. Most of the banter was local, but the worn and yellowed posters, hiding behind corners that curled inward, gave outsiders a constant presence in the building. Sport was a topic the Arena was comfortable with both for locals and outsiders.

Hockey, or sport in general, primed the bonding area. The first rite of passage to partial acceptance in Town was in the Arena. Partial only because the last rite of acceptance was ancestry; you really had to have always been there to be completely acceptable. In many cases it was also the only escape for young men unsatisfied with their lot of remaining in Town. Only the National Hockey League was stronger than Town's gravity.

In spite of the bitter cold within the unheated and uninsulated Arena, everyone who entered was stripped. Skill and knowledge outweighed every other worldly station, commanding respect here. Only in this setting could Town's lower castes redeem themselves. Without the protective blanket of sporting excellence, their inadequacies were bared to their neighbors. The blanket of sport was powerful, however, and the mere mention of the Arena and success would assure athletes a higher place in Town.

Two other modern, architecturally rich buildings were kept at a distance from Main Street. They were schools, and they too reeked of the unease of generations. That they were young and odd, or that they couldn't hold their water (requiring roof tarring every Spring) was not the problem. They were undermining the Pool Hall's and the General Store's authority, insidiously alienating the children,

unveiling the world and inciting wanderlust, separating youth from age with impenetrable walls. They were in a word, with so many fancy windows and curtained rooms: bad.

The two schools had replaced outgrown buildings, but they were held in lower esteem than those predecessors because they were *so new*. The schools that were there before them were non-threatening in their mediocrity. They were understandable buildings with single or double corridors sprouting classrooms and offices on both sides. There were no courtyards, circular hallways, or multi-purpose rooms with curtained walls. They were simple.

The new school buildings did have all of those odd things, and they were threatening. Their eccentricity fostered resentment for having replaced the one-room schoolhouses and church basements. In fact they were a generation removed from the country schoolhouses, but they bread the contempt their immediate predecessors never did. These new schools were grudgingly permitted to hold the children, but only because of the law; every parent's, every moment outside the schools would be devoted to undoing the damage done weekdays.

And so goes life in Town, each building having a place and serving its own purpose – even the empty and condemned – among all the others. The pressure of evolution and progress is everywhere, but in Town it is the inverted struggle to remain the same rather than change. So the Rhubarb Pie will likely remain unblemished by the state of the world well into the twenty-first century.

I moved to a much bigger town at the first opportunity, and from there I went on to the City. I had longed to leave my rural hustings and go to the city for a long time, but what I had pictured in gauzy romantic dreams was, in reality, an underwhelming experience. The City had grown geometrically, becoming a thriving, world-class metropolis within a decade. With that came all the changes inherent in urban growth. Inner city decay, irreparably rutted streets, and incessant pounding of jackhammers were the least of the city's problems.

Often I would explore the many new and interesting parts of the city. One day, as I walked through the dark canyons, looking at the buildings and at myself in all their mirrors, I wondered why I couldn't hear talking. Apart from the streetcars and construction machinery, there was still a lot of noise because everyone was speaking. But that was all there was.

The thought stayed with me for years, and it wasn't until I left the City that I understood how the buildings were like me. They were new to their part of the world. They had no roots and no sense of being in the places they occupied. Theirs was a functional existence without the history of the buildings in Town; history on which to build from a solid foundation.

The General Store has such memories.

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