

Our Building

by Ebony Hargrave

It begins at five past five in the morning. The creaks beneath the houses that shift everyone from one side of the bed to the other. People have grown used to it, but most learn to rise just before. Doorways shift, hinges buckle. Everyone has sliding doors now. Everyone has locks on the cupboards and padding between the plates. Cutlery is washed and wrapped in bubble film every evening; knives are kept in special containers; all water jugs are emptied of their contents.

I miss the plants the most. The potted soil and delicate flowers. Some people still have them, but the constant clean-up of soil and water spillage is tedious. Mum and dad stopped tending plants a long time ago. Now they put their time into work. It is what everyone has ended up doing – rising at five past five and beginning the walk to work. The walk to work is tough, or so mum and dad tell us. My sister is not looking forward to it any more than I am, but just like the plants, we will have to grow and move on one day.

My sister and I wake even earlier than the adults. Sneaking out of the screen covered windows in all the clothes we had hidden the night before and searching out the highest building just to watch the city move, we defy the wake-up call and wait.

In the summer, the first light of dawn illuminates the polluted glow of the city, drowning out the man-made light. It is why summer is my favourite time. Atop the older buildings, where we are not supposed to be, the movement that runs the clocks almost seems to wait for us to be in position before beginning.

One past five ... two past five ... three past five ...

The minutes tick over, and then the creaking starts, and the building beneath our feet rumbles. Below that, each street becomes less rigid. Cracks in the pavement widen, stray stones fall in between, downtrodden chewing gum shatters and pulls. No one is about yet. No one goes out onto the streets until it ends. Right now, it is just us and the city as the horizon begins to pale over the streets breaking into nonsensical chunks while the curbs come away from static buildings that resolutely stand their ground. Every piece tears away from the other to rise and fall to different heights, and the tremors are such that our expectant breathing is drowned out by the roar of the waking city. Road signs and street lamps rise to eye level; buildings that scrape the sky now sink into the earth; city parks are placed in the centre, street shops on the outskirts; western suburbs become eastern suburbs, northern districts southern.

A brick building of housing units rises past us, and a woman hanging out a batch of early morning washing from her balcony waves in passing. Her grey hair is in rollers,

and a cigarette points from her teeth to the emerging sunrise. We wave back under the gentle spray of fresh laundry.

Everyone has locks on their pegs now. Mum says it is cheaper for the government to hand them out than replace every article of clothing that falls into the cracks. Dad disagrees. He is more concerned about why they tell us to stay home now.

“It’s not right,” he says to us at dinner. “We aren’t meant to stay trapped in one place; the world is meant to move. Just look outside.”

Mum says nothing, because she disagrees. Secretly, she is glad he has to stay home, even though he spends most of his time grumbling about it. She is glad she can stay home now too.

“The walk to work is too treacherous,” she says at breakfast, packing our lunchboxes for school. “At least you kids can go to school in the same building you live in.”

Dad is never up before breakfast. He is one of the few who can sleep through the five past five city shift. So, out of the two of them, it is most likely mum that knows about our morning escapades outside of the building. And standing there, atop a crumbling building with old television cables wound around rusting rebars that jut out from eroding concrete, I am sure this freedom we are afforded is from her silence. The lady with her rollers and washing, now far above, knows the same thing.

Below and above, all around, the city shifts and adjusts into a new formation. It is never the same as the day before, and the layout never repeats. Dad says, on the news, they theorise that it breaks further apart every time it moves, and that one day the bits will be so small we will all just fall in. Mum says he is a pessimist, which I think means he likes to grumble. But she says it with a kiss to his cheek, so it must not be all that bad to be a pessimist.

Dad complains and grumbles about anything and everything.

When the movement first started happening, he grumbled about rent. When dishes started falling out of cupboards, he grumbled about taxes. When we started going to school down in Ms. Petrie’s kitchen, he grumbled about the walk to work. Mum never grumbles though. I asked her what the opposite of a pessimist was, and she said, “An optimist.” She was doing the washing up at the time, and her face was all flushed from the work. I think mum is an optimist, and I think dad knows this too. After he has had his grumble, he will often go quiet, and if mum has not done the washing or cleared the table, he will do it instead, but he never says anything.

My sister is the same.

Under our fingertips, through the soles of our shoes, the building vibrates. We look at each other as seeds of excitement grow, rooting us to the rooftop. It is our turn; our building is moving now! We lean over the edge and watch the ground crack and break. The building pulls away from the street and begins to lower with a thundering rumble, down, down, down, down ...

The other buildings go far above us, and the meagre light of day is lost for a moment as we descend, the cold earth rushing past like dark waves. The smell of rich earth overtakes the usual rusty asphalt and painted glass that surrounds us, plunging us and our little building down towards the heat of molten ash and slumbering rock, now disturbed by the city's movement. Is this what the bottom of the ocean looks like – the only light source hovering above, just out of reach?

Below the surface are lines and pipes. Some of them are dry or empty, cut off from their supplies. Others are still leaking or sparking. Sometimes the power plants forget to turn off the electricity or the water. Dad complains about that too. But for those things, even mum agrees with him.

We slow, slow, slow... and stop, but it is more of a dip, like reaching the bottom of a roller coaster. And then we are ascending again, the angle of the building turning obtuse as we are moved forward and past libraries, supermarkets, and malls. The light returns, and we are whisked back up to the sky, the rumbles and groans of the city drilling their way up our legs and feet.

"We're near the centre!" My sister says, pointing excitedly behind us.

The city centre. The only reason either of us knows this to be true is because there is one landmark in this city that does not move. We have seen it eleven times now, including this morning – a small patch of grass with a single tree. It has a small hole in the middle where the trunk has grown around a bicycle wheel. It never moves. It just stays happily in place while everything around it changes, still growing; perfectly content.

Sometimes I think dad could learn from that tree.

My sister runs over to the other side of the roof, and I follow suit, trying to catch a glimpse of the tree. It is the only permanent thing we have anymore. Although, inside of this moving cityscape, everyone's days have become more permanent.

On the news, all they talk about is staying inside and keeping everyone safe. It is too dangerous to go out amidst all the chaos of a shifting world, and if we do, we need to take precautions. The pads on my knees and elbows rub against the concrete and brick, not dissimilar to the one's my sister wears. Mum made them for us before we had to stop walking to school, but she never took them away.

Our birthday presents were helmets. "Standard issue," mum said, handing them over.

They are grey and shiny, and everyone has at least one – mandatory wearing when outside the building. Some people refuse to wear them. They say they do not believe the city movement is all that dangerous, and that they are not harming anyone by doing what they please, especially since the city only moves once a day.

Mum and dad argue about that sometimes.

Last week they fought. Dad believes he should not have to wear one, and mum ended up crying because he would not listen. Only mum thinks about being safe. But

I always thought that pessimists were the ones who would want to be safe. Maybe dad is tired of being safe. Maybe that is why he stormed off and left the building. We are not supposed to leave the building. They talk about that on the news as well. But regardless of the news, we have not seen him since then. The city moves too often. If it was only the walk to work, he would have all the routes mapped out and be able to make it back on the same day, but he left everything behind except his coat, so not even mum knows where he is. She cried a lot after that. Maybe even optimists get to cry sometimes, just as pessimists get to be happy.

My sister did not cry at all. Neither did I, but I think that is because I always carry around a bicycle wheel in my stomach, just like that tree. It sits there, and it cannot spin, but even if I grow around it, the thing is always there, making it difficult to be properly happy or sad. I do not know if there is a word for being neither optimist nor pessimist, but maybe I am that.

Watching the rising sun as it emerges from behind the rearranged towers, I find that the wheel disappears for a while. It is why we started coming up here, my sister and I. For a few minutes a morning, I can breathe and not think about dad being gone or mum doing the washing on her own.

That is the thing about staying home. Even though we are all together, sometimes it is lonely.

I see mum sneak off to pilfer some of the precious wine supplies of a Friday evening, and she reorganises the photos of her parents, because they live outside the city, and now we cannot see or speak with them.

I see dad have a quick smoke some mornings after breakfast, even though he promised to stop years ago, and it smells the same as what his best friend used to smoke before his house was swallowed up by the first city shifts. I think dad used to be an optimist before his best friend disappeared.

I see my sister play with her toys, but some of them are not hers. She thinks they are ugly, because her friends have bad taste, but she plays with them because her friends disappeared too, and the moth-eaten plushies, the sun-weathered doll plastic, and the twine-wrapped, googly-eyed, handmade cutlery sets are all she has left.

I see myself in the mirror. Just my forehead and eyes most days. Mum's cabinet is too tall for me, and if she caught me standing on her chair, even her room would be off limits. I suppose it is hers now, since dad is no longer here. But I go into her room and peek over the cabinet to see if the standard issue helmet messes up my hair or not.

On the rooftop, I am wearing it now, even though it is slightly too big and keeps tipping over my eyes. My sister wears hers over a beanie, and if she was not my sister, I might tell her how genius that idea is. We watch that tree with the bicycle wheel in its trunk as our building finally decides to settle, the vibrations jarring our legs.

I wonder if dad is somewhere around here – that we might find him today. Every day has stretched out longer since he left. It has been raining, so watching the city move in the middle of a storm has not been an option. We went out just once, my sister and I, and lightning struck a building moving past us, the thunderous crack of the following thunder crisping the rooftop antennas. Since then, we have stopped going out on rainy mornings.

Today is the first sunny day we have had since he left. And somehow our building has managed to find its way to the city edge. The orange glow of dawn slips through the rearranged skyscrapers and scattered suburbia as we stare out over the abyss that is the old freeway. Empty of vehicles and broken in a straight line, the gap of a perfect mile stretches from the broken road to the doorway of our building. And to every building that ends up on the outskirts of the city radius. The jagged drop into the darkness of the earth spans that mile, and while the news says the distance to the old freeway is one mile, no one knows how deep the drop is. They are still searching apparently.

Staring down at it now, over the edge of our building, I wonder if dad is down there. The walk to work is treacherous, after all. But he was not walking to work, he was walking away from home. The bicycle wheel in my middle shifts, as if trying to rotate around to the correct emotion to feel, but I have grown around it too well, and it stays in place. I do not feel anything, I just know thinking about it hurts.

Neither of us hear mum walk out onto the rooftop. She has adopted a slower walk since working from home, as if all the days when she and dad navigated to work have caught up with her. And without dad sharing the workload, she moves slower still. My sister and I are clutching the trailing edge, kneepads pressed into the brick, palms finding the eroding cracks of endless shifting. And maybe it is for that reason neither of us are surprised when she moves between us to look over the side. Neither of us jump much anymore, surprised or not. And maybe it is the abyss below that has eroded our sense of caution, or the sight of a road we are no longer connected to that has stretched out our worries into nothing, or maybe, just maybe... we all have bicycle wheels in our stomachs.

The sun is up now. Mum has a blanket around her shoulders, and the dawn pierces through the threadbare fabric, reflecting off the standard issue helmet she has remembered to wear as well.

“I’m glad I didn’t miss it,” she says, every vowel containing a croak. She does not smoke, but when one person smokes, so does everyone else. It is strange not smelling dad’s habits anymore.

My sister hugs mum, slowly, preciously, as if in defiance of the rapid tempo of the city. Mum shares the blanket and puts an arm around me too, but my bicycle wheel is still fixed firmly, and I cannot move.

Why is she here? She never comes out with us. She is not supposed to. These outings are special; no adults allowed.

“Did you see the tree?”

“Just for a bit,” I say.

“Is the bike still there?”

Her arm on my back grows heavy. I shrug it off. “Yes.”

The wheel in my stomach smells like smoke now. It is burning under the sun – the first sun we have had in a week. I want to ask why she is not angry, why she has not dragged us back inside or forbidden us from doing this. But I know.

Someone left a bicycle wheel over a small sapling and never returned to claim it. So the tree grew around it, setting the wheel in place. That tree grew and set a foundation so it could not be moved, even in the midst of a churning city. We too cannot move from this building, our building. It is safer that way, even though everything moves around us – away from us to another place, leaving behind rubble and bicycle wheels.

Dad left a bicycle wheel too. I see it now, under the blanket mum wraps around her arms.

Eventually she removes the blanket and places it over my shoulders, and the smoking wheel, cut off from the air and sun, cools. The clock ticks over to quarter past five. The city shudders into place. The rumblings die down and the pavements fit together in mismatched pieces.

“Is dad coming back?” I ask, staring into the black hole of the earth, even with the sun out, there is no end, no stopping point. It continues into oblivion.

Mum adjusts the buckle of the helmet at my chin, holding my sister off to one side. “As long as you do... as long as you both do, that’s all that matters.”