

Smoke + Mirrors: Cities and Compassion an Economic Ruse

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Lindsay Wincherauk

Embarking on this manuscript, I envisioned it as an insignificant murmur, a thread of randomness unravelled from the labyrinth of my restless mind. But as I tether my existence to a steel rope and drag it across life's uneven terrain, I find myself ensnared in its treacherous coils. The eyelet—that cursed aperture—refuses to yield. With each fruitless tug, steel splinters skewer my flesh, a cruel reminder of the pain engulfing me as my vocation disintegrated into the void.

I watch the years tick by, each one marking the steady decline of my family's financial security — 60, 61, 62, 63, and now, on the cusp of 64 — our existence teetering on the precipice of ruin.

My desperation mounts as I send out job application after job application, a relentless stream of hope cast into the void, a desperate attempt to prevent my family from becoming casualties of homelessness.

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The TV blares, a searing cacophony of the world's relentless noise. Flickering images and blaring voices spill from the television, narrating the plight of a young man mangled in the savage jaws of a swimming accident. It's a young man, broken by a dive into still waters, his family's plight broadcasted for sympathy and aid.

The GoFundMe page their beacon of salvation, quivering with the potential to raise the \$50,000 for his treatment abroad. It sparks a bitter laughter within me. I had erected a GoFundMe page, too – a feeble cry into the digital void for assistance as each month beckoned the shadow of homelessness closer.

But sympathy does not extend to a man like me, marred by the stigma of being seen nursing a beer, the tonic for my suffocating predicament.

2

I freeze, emotions swelling as the injured young man echoes the platitude, "Others have it worse." The words are a knife, twisting into the raw flesh of my experience.

A primal urge to scream engulfs me – a scream for recognition that every individual's battle is valid, despite the scorn of those who dismiss our struggles as trifling, who do not bear the weight of our lives or the right to cheapen our pain with their indifference.

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This manuscript was never meant to be a tome of darkness, yet it has become a testimonial to the trials faced by my family, now involuntary participants in this grim social experiment.

Amidst the constant rejection from the job market, it dawns on me that my only remaining asset is the wisdom procured from nearly 64 years of living – a life of observation and listening, punctuated by the sharp release of humour, my weapon of choice to lance the bubbling abscess of my reality.

3

I accept with resignation my crowdfunding plea will likely yield nothing. I lack the compelling narrative of a visible tragedy, the classic archetype to elicit empathy and open wallets.

I'm just an everyman battling the vicissitudes of existence, seeking solace in brief reprieves, aware such indulgences, such as sipping a beer, provide others with the comforting illusion their successes are solely born of superior choices rather than the blind grace of fortune.

4

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A block's journey in my shoes – what unfurls before me?
Suffering cloaked in the banal.
A mayor's hollow enthusiasm for Sloppy Joes fails to
mask his pandering; my instinct revolts at the insincerity.

Another block, where the jingle of coins from a
beggar's cup is a siren song highlighting our shared
plight. I, too, am a hair's breadth away from extending
my own hand, forever teetering on the brink of dire
need.

The rift widens – those who wobble on the precipice of despair are
deemed eyesores, inconvenient truths to be cleansed from the
consciousness of the “concerned” citizens who, deep down,
couldn't care less.

5

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A friend recently enthused about the unique perspective my writings offer, flattering my ego with words of encouragement, suggesting my voice – a blend of insight and hardened skepticism – is one the world needs more of, even in the sullied world of politics.

6

And so, from Vancouver to Munich, politicians peddle their visions—grandiose plans and platitudes without substance, the Sloppy Joes they promise never reaching the mouths of those they serve.

It's a global theater, where every city vies for the same fleeting dollars, riches of gold, all the while neglecting the cries of its own aching citizens.

In the shadowed corners of progress, where a major company plants its roots promising a cascade of jobs - a mere four paying a living wage - the city's underbelly swells with despair. People tumble into the streets, their plight invisible to those cloaked in the sanctity of 'family values,' blind to the humanity they once recognized in each other.

The rhetoric of 'think of the children' rings hollow, as if those falling were never children, only to become society's latest scourge.

The proprietor of a local craft brewery laments the prohibitive costs of his trade, while a man tormented by poverty succumbs to theft, taking an apple. He is quickly assailed by a loss prevention officer, who himself teeters on the brink of financial ruin.

Those who watch from a safer vantage offer silent approval, yet they too cannot escape the trauma of witnessing poverty's brutal realities. They gossip about the distress before them, painting the impoverished as a plague to be erased, not seeing their shared humanity or the underlying systemic failures.

Just over the border, a blustering politician rouses his crowd with venom, decrying perceived enemies poisoning bloodlines.

10

Meanwhile, I fight to make rent, overhearing acquaintances coldly debate the 'clean-up' of homelessness and poverty as if discussing an unsightly stain on their conscience.

They yearn to scrub away the guilt, desperate to return to small talk and superficial concerns. Amidst this, my heart aches - I yearn to enact change.

To those who skirmish with adversity, may clarity unveil the true value of existence and inspire a gentler approach towards our global siblings.

Yet, the chasm between the opulent and the struggling widens, the voices of the latter drowned out by the unrelenting drumbeat of privilege dictating who is deserving, even of sickness.

I watch as a famished soul, fearful of public humiliation or literal displacement, seeks refuge in a fast-food restaurant. But even here, they are denied the small mercy of a self-serve soda - a young employee, trained to deny the undeserving, manipulates the machine.

When security expels the indigent soul, there's no shelter from the scorn of the masses, whose misunderstanding of the struggle ignores the irony of their own potential fate; as they dine on fast-food.

I listen to the platitudes of the injured swimmer, carefully crafted to plunder emotions and donations from those voyeuristically engaged with suffering.

What treachery is this, that even empathy is subject to commodification?

The irony in the narrative is striking; the swimmer who sustained injuries did so through his own actions, yet those who have been neglected by society and find themselves struggling on the streets are often criticized for their supposed bad decisions.

The mayor, his lips smeared with the remnants of a Sloppy Joe, proclaims his dedication to a city clean and secure.
For whom does he toil, if not for those who twine the safety net his words unravel?

My tirade barrels toward the inevitable clasp - this is not for you, not for me. The impassioned monologues of civic leaders ricochet across the globe, camouflaging a continuous crowdfunding of urban spaces, relentlessly thrust upon tragedies echoing worldwide.

15

To care profoundly for those in poverty demands Herculean resilience. Most politicians would rather wield brooms or pressure hoses, washing away the discomfort of poverty, than confront the encroaching giant of destitution with truth and transformative policy. Instead, they allure behemoths like Amazon and Tesla with fiscal incentives, further glossing the façade of vitality while the rest of us reckon with the gravity of our depleted pockets.

16

My confession: I'm ill-equipped with answers. But in another time, under the mantle of resilience, I may find the nerve to champion the unvoiced, sacrificing political dreams on the altar of necessity.

In essence, the reluctance to enact meaningful change stems from politicians whose primary concern is securing their next electoral victory. To them, showing compassion for the individuals struggling on their own streets is considered politically detrimental, akin to committing career suicide.

17

As consciousness breaks through the veil of sleep, one must grapple with the enigmatic reality of an upmarket second-hand emporium opening on a major street, trading in aspirations, demanding the forsaking of life's necessities as its price.

Here, our youth, their spirits already battered by the relentless assault of economic hardship, find themselves lured into the hollow pageantry of so-called conscious consumerism—a seductive masquerade that promises fulfillment but only perpetuates their bondage.

It becomes ever clearer our civic institutions do not bleed for us; they bleed us dry in the guise of urban allure, sweeping those in torment neatly out of the public eye.

My desire to leave a positive imprint upon this world
burns fiercely.

20

I watch, an anguished spectator with dreams of change, discerning the tragic comedy of a second-hand store positioned as a beacon of fashion, affordable to few.

Reflect on this sobering vision - a second-hand store, an emblem of sustainability, spawns within the so-called metropolis, selling worn threads at prices rivaling the fleeting allure of fast fashion.

Contemplate this: Could the emerging second-hand store, nestled in the heart of the city, be a stark symbol—a metaphor of increasing hardship jostling for existence amidst the monolithic corporate behemoths and the affluent tourists the city yearns to draw into its embrace?

The very inception of this modest enterprise poses an unspoken challenge to the prevailing narrative of prosperity, weaving a tapestry of resilience in the face of relentless riches.

I possess no remedy to soothe the afflictions of our society - perhaps the prospect of solace resides in the yet unfathomed depths, waiting for someone courageous enough to embody its form in deeds and decrees.

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For now, I travel wearily, eyes fixed on the distant hope that humanity will persevere against the tumultuous storm of apathy and anguish that threatens to swallow us whole.

In the midst of mental fog, I fear the specter of homelessness stalking me.

Subject to the same demographic targeted by the mayor's fast-food-fueled campaign, all in an effort to seem relatable – I cannot recall the taste of a Sloppy Joe.

Still, unlike the political mercenaries, my life-platform would not be built on fabricated nostalgia, aimed to attract votes, but rather on the unvarnished, painful truth of the dispossessed souls around us - once children, now ignored, forgotten, consumed by despair. 'Think of the children?' they implore. But do they, or do they merely wish to avoid the discomfort of recognition; all in an effort to protect property values?

As this chapter of the story draws to an end, the path unclear, I sit, and a stream of words cascades onto the page - approximately 1,800 (in this typing) - a mosaic of rage, reflection, and the relentless search for a conversation to really start.

Does anyone know where I can find a needle with an open eyelet?

And when did we stop thinking of the children?



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