

Millionaire's Row

A wispy champa curl rose—flitted, curled and danced—above her smoldering ember, dispersing into an intoxicating fog that collected in a temperate sheet a few feet off of the ground. Esther and I were poured onto the gargantuan red micro-fiber couch. The gaudy thing dominated the in size and wear. It was the only piece of furniture which wasn't patched corduroy, sagging particle board or granted second life from a curb.

The red expanse was the only place in our shared apartment where we both felt comfortable in our nakedness. Sometimes we lounged with limbs splayed at ridiculous angles for days. It was a sickeningly sweet romance. We had no need, no desire. We filled each other's cavities on that comfy couch. A famous imaginary author may have called us *das Reich der Zwei*.

There was a framed hole in the wall between the living room and kitchen of the rotten and infested apartment. Today, I could barely see through what our slum-lord called "open-concept design."

The champa had been burning for hours, since Esther had waked. From my contortion I observed the faint movement of incense as it approached the immense kitchen window, billowed to unseen drafts and reflected striations of afternoon sunshine.

It was oppressively hot outside and we occupied an oven with western walls. Her skin was cooler than the air and her hair was shower damp and floral, straight and fresh. The kitchen window was at least six feet tall and made from ancient single paneled glass held together by moldings, painted and repainted an impossible number of times. There were no counterweights on the bottom slide so opening the window required a purple faced, protruding veined dead lift. The glass was so thin that one could hear conversations at street level as if the glass was replaced by soap bubbles.

Sometimes I could hear Esther's mandolin as I strolled the block. I callously wondered how long it would be until someone broke in, stole her other lover and pawned it for meth. We lived in a tent amidst the ghetto.

Looking west from the second floor one saw only dilapidated mansions like ours until the blazing sun made your eyes drip. They vacant except for hundred year old ghosts and the modern day spirits like Esther.

Many mornings, as I waited for the tea water to boil, I would stand and visualize the rail boom. Sometimes I was skillful enough to be transported away from the rotting core of this decaying city and into beating heart of "Millionaire's Row."

We are at ground zero of America's industrial revolution. This is the neighborhood where profiteers, robber barons, Indian killers, fossil fuel addicts and global-imperial warlords dreamed of their conquests. What a beautiful and opulent place.

The nation's elite have since fled to more respectable and less sustainable outskirts. They were drawn toward the airports, car dealerships and big box stores of the suburbs. Their posh inner city womb turned bequeathed afterbirth. First, to the horny handed sons of toil sold their family's plot for a down payment on my mansion. That farmland was, in turn, plowed under for airports, car dealerships and big box stores. Then, a new supply of inhabitants came to "Millionaire's Row," attracted by the factory wage labor that darkened the sky and polluted the water.

After the factories were moved overseas, the present caste moved into the neighborhood. These were drug addicts, welfare mothers and ne'er-do-wells. People like me and Esther. Our neighbors were stressed: ranting chock-full of amphetamines, scrimping until the next paycheck or dead without the social-safety net.

Whatever the situation, they would wait anxiously for a hook up or handout, the dope man, bank man or mail man to come feed their fix. The rhythm of our neighborhood was not based on school or work or family. Rather it was a gaping void of need followed by the fleeting ecstasy of indulgence, simple and morose, on the first and fifteenth. Every "payday" was like *Mardi Gras* on "Millionaire's Row."

Our mansion was decrepit. It was full of black mold. The siding crumbled onto the cracked sidewalk. Hundreds of creatures supported the ecosystem: hornets, roaches, rats, bats, stray cats and human strays. The humans were actually the bottom of this food chain, supplying the rest

with their waste and filth.

"If all the vermin paid rent, we could finally afford to buy that paddle boat you've always wanted," Esther was too refined to laugh at my jokes.

This blooming flower was plucked from a palatial garden by a wanderlusting hay-seed. Her family would never abide someone of my class. I listened for the reassuring rustle from the walls and floorboards and thought about turning on my battery powered radio.

The odors of the neighborhood changed in a familiar pattern. Early mildew followed by the creosote factory then waking cigarette smoke ruled until sleepy drug smoke took over. The day usually ended with wet garbage.

It rained nearly every night. It didn't smell like the rain of my country childhood: fresh and blooming. Instead, the city rain washed foul marine smells from the river and puffed human waste into the air. If I couldn't identify the exact time of day from the sounds of hungry babies, rattling cicadas, thumping hoodies or domestic abuse; I could approximate with my sniffer.

On summer nights all the vermin, insects and people, would leave their holes and sit on the mansion porches to wait for the crash of thunder, olfactory burst and relieving chill of the baptismal wash as it passed over the Wabash and absolved us of whatever brought us here.

Esther and I stared at the champa as it billowed. She was perhaps the only thing here that wasn't coated with grime or reeking of regret. I would return to our apartment from my depressing constitutionals with tales of agony and woe only to be bludgeoned back to life by her softness. She was a child of privilege that followed me to the belly of anguish.

As we sprawled across the big red couch, my fingertips explored the indescribably soft skin over her clavicle. I inhaled the incense deeply and spoke, "I'm thinking about walking down to the Sunoco to get some of that yellow curry ramen. You wanna come?" The neighborhood was densely populated, but there were no true grocery stores for miles. Without a car, one could eat from the Sunoco (a gas station with bullet proof glass and a fine selection of frozen Indian food), the Asian market (a more legitimate storefront full of frozen fish, canned strangeness and monosodium glutamate), or an Arby's which was continuously being burned down and rebuilt.

Esther distractedly wiped moisture (either sweat or lingering shower water) from her brow and said, "I think I'm going to lounge a while longer. You are nuts to go outside in this heat." She scrunched up her nose. My brain responded with a flood of oxytocin. I buried my face in her neck and growled. She giggled, struggled and pushed me away without any meaningful force. "Get some Kefir from the store. I want to make sour bread later tonight."

I was glad that we lived in such a poor place that trendy and ethnic foods were still inexpensive. Soccer moms everywhere would be full of consternation if they could see the mark up that occurs between the slums and the suburbs but I'm sure they're content to pay more dollars for fewer unsavory interactions.

I stood up and dressed from a haphazard pile on the floor. Then I gifted my lover a smooch and started to sweat as I entered middle-America's egalitarian oppression: August humidity.

Esther was nude and napping when I returned flushed and moist. I poured a glass of water, careful to let the tap run to flush out the normal precipitate that circulated through the ancient pipes.

Esther had not even shifted since I left. It was as if the heat had pressed down with such force that she struggled to breathe. The outline of where I had been sitting still spooned her lower half.

It was five o'clock, the time when wicks turned to fuses and the heat began to ignite the most violent passions. The only respite came from the rain. I reminded Esther of this fact, waking her with my voice, "Lady at the store told me we were gonna get a soaker tonight."

"Always do." She was unimpressed, trying to maintain her slipping grasp of sleep. She never told me how much she hated "Millionaire's Row."

I was not so guarded. It was almost every day at this time that I would start to pine for my northern home in the woods and the eight month winters. I would repress my angst until I held onto a scabbard full of vitriol; it was how I was taught by my parents.

She had learned to release her dissatisfaction in short bursts before they could become furious bombs. Either tactic was useless during these stagnant afternoons before the rain came. It was a dangerous time for the universal psyche of the neighborhood.

We were so disheveled by August. It is a condition as old as "Millionaire's Row." This seasonal disorder didn't discriminate between the robber barons or ghetto people or even the transplanted and bewildered folk like Esther. The rains cleaned us all, regardless of class or status.

The long summer day dragged on. We spent it in separate rooms, brooding with discomfort, quietly waiting for dusk. As the long shadows got dimmer, I met Esther at the bottom of the stairs. We silently clasped hands and walked onto the porch with the rest of the critters and waited.

The roaches and the meth heads and stray cats looked skyward with expectation as the thunderhead darkened our collective sky. We prayed with the ghosts of farmers, laborers and magnates alike— looking to the clouds like ecstatic tribesmen. And with a flash, crack and shudder it came. We were clean for another day.

Esther's bare feet stepped gingerly down the porch stairs and onto the side walk. She smiled at me through a mat of sopping hair that covered most of her face. The rain was short lived and brutal.

When it was over, Esther and I climbed the stairs, stripped off our clothes and piled them in the corner. My last upright maneuver was to flick a flint and reignite the half charred champa stick.

I absorbed the perfume for just a moment and felt the souls of millionaires and malcontents dissolve into the darkness. I explored a familiar geography to find it splayed and inviting. We curled into a nation of two with borders defined by a mass of flesh and hair intertwined on a gargantuan red micro-fiber couch.

We greeted a familiar new wisp of smoke as it rose—flitted curled and danced above her burning ember. Esther's breath slowed to sleep and she dreamed of becoming rich enough to finally leave this paradise.