ABSTRACT

This piece of prose presents an imagined scenario of a city in ruins and explores the materialistic side of the idea of home. Speaking directly to the reader, this story asks us to consider the role of family within the basic unit of community, in a child's experience, and of course, in survival. The immigrant experience is considered: is purposefully selling everything parallel to losing everything in a disaster? This story also encourages the reader to think about the what-ifs in light of climate change—the rising chance of your home being hit by an ice storm, hurricane, or another extreme weather event—in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS

speculation, family, natural disaster, materialism, loss

The summer sky is baby blue with new clouds. If there are still trees standing, not a leaf will stir, not a scent will travel in the weightless, motionless air. If you can imagine, flattened remains of a city are sprinkled on the sloped hills all the way from what people remembered to be Highway 7 to the north shore of what people remembered to be Lake Ontario.

The first waves of returning humans trace memories of avenues and neighbourhood roads, trickling back on their own two feet, gravitating like migratory butterflies toward what used to be their homes. You navigate through after-images of landmarks and intersections, making a careful trail through the underbrush of fresh rubble. There's a magnetic pull, a homing instinct, and you're there, stepping over fallen trees and shattered timbers on a lawn (your lawn?), greener than ever after the rains. The driveway and surrounding asphalt are cracked, ruptured, broken. You need to find food, shelter, anything.

Maybe there's a family with you. Maybe you are the child, discovering with glee that her house was converted into a jungle gym. Maybe the same child, missing TV and warm food. Or you have the child inside begging to play, but as the big sister, you must remember to rein in your little sister, in case she falls and dies or something else.

You don't want to be the parents, not yet; all they see are numbers and dollar signs, insurance and worry and empty questions. Still, you want to remember this time of disaster through a matured memory, and so you are fifteen, the age at which you stopped growing taller. And on a straight street of uniform destruction, you go exploring—purposefully—for any clue of

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the whereabouts of your house. You play tightrope over a maze of splinters and drywall as your parents have to contend with a seven-year-old ball of annoyance. You dexterously climb and

hop while answering their worried questions, and occasionally stop at a lamp or a couch, comparing their dirty haphazard images with the ones in your memory. Was that your chair, or a neighbour's? Every time you visualize the furniture you grew up around and compare it to torn cushions, springs showing, it's a catharsis, a realization, and you learn to accept it with each repetition.

"We're lost." You hear your parents bickering.

"This is Willowherb Drive. I'm right," your dad says.

"I'm tired," complains your sister.

"Then where the condo?" snaps your mother in her thick accent, pointing towards the sky in the wrong direction. The morning sun is in the east, and the condos were northwest of the highway, but neither the highway lights nor the high-rises were left standing.

Cars have sunk into their storm-battered parking spots, crushed by trees or other debris, shells glinting like dead beetles. Every so often, you spy a thin stick of something still standing in the distance, either a telephone pole or a tree stripped bare.

And then you see it: a hand-painted banner laid across the ground, in tatters but visibly red. The giant 福 design still legible. A Chinese version of a welcome mat, proclaiming luck and fortune for all.

Naturally, you call for your family, still moving at a snail's (or seven-year-old's) pace on the relatively walkable road, and hold up the banner. It slowly rips in half and falls from the frame as they approach. "This is our house!" you want to shout, but instead watch the paper slink down into a mess of pulp. You mourn the slightly red papier-mâché for a few heartbeats, and shrug.

Now is the point where your dad might let loose a string of Mandarin expletives, as the banner was his pride and joy—the 福 was painted by a cousin, travelled with their suitcases, and hung on the dining-room wall for just a year, then slid into a box for paranoid safekeeping. Or your dad may cry upon finally coming to terms that his house, like his treasured banner, is beyond recovery. Another possibility is your mom crying in her obnoxious way while a single stray tear builds up in the corner of dad's left eye. You've never noticed him cry anyway.

This puff of pink insulation foam was what kept you warm during the ice storm of 2013. A chunk of floorboard might've been the one you split your lip on—a poorly aimed cartwheel. The ruins develop sentimental meaning, a history, prompting the urge to carve your name here and turn it into a protected archaeological site. Then you look at your neighbour's pile, mixed with your own. The storm stripped ownership bare.

Walking away from these ruins seems possible right now, but your parents plop your sister on a dry section of fallen roof and start picking up and sorting through objects. You want to mention that they've already sold their home in China, that starting from scratch should be their middle names. Yet broken

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pottery continues to be gathered up, placed loudly into a damaged sink. You dump your school-turned-survival backpack next to

your sister and roll your eyes at the sky.

You do your best to ignore your parents' rapid-fire talking and go instead to the fridge, on its side but closed. You open it, expecting some spoiled food, but nothing is inside, save for empty boxes. There are no canned goods, no matter how hard you try to estimate their location and sift through the fallen mess of the second floor.

"There's no food," you say, absolved of responsibility, and start to play a game.

If the kitchen is here, then the living room is there to the right. You see the couches in a different arrangement, easy to overlook if you didn't know what you were looking for. If that was the end of the hardwood and the start of ceramic tiles, you deduce, then this area here would be the staircase.

The hundreds—no, thousands—of times you navigated these steps, day and night, in hot and cold, have created a palace of memories. You place your feet carefully between jagged edges of building material, and the house almost materializes. You feel the old bounceless carpet beneath socks or bare feet. You climb up eight steps, make a left turn, then eight more. You remember dragging the old vacuum cleaner across each level, then the new one gliding effortlessly, left and right, not making much of a difference on the aged carpet.

After calculating the distance of the upstairs hallway with your steps, you think you have reached your room, or at least the remains of it: there are traces of fake mahogany furniture all over the TV room and the garage, and you recognize a crumpled structure, once housing your plants. You look for your stuff, your clothes, or that rug you crocheted out of the family's old clothes. Unfinished art projects and repurposed junk once took up too much space and became a nuisance. Bending down, you see little origami triangles scattered like freshly fallen snow, and you think, finally, those things I couldn't bear to toss, I'm now freed of.

Your family calls your name gruffly, and you dutifully rejoin them, circled around a neighbour's car. It's parked nicely on the driveway, surrounded by debris, but the windows are shattered, and the trunk has been forced open. Your family

concludes that this happened before the storm, and the looters are probably dead, but you aren't so sure.

Returning to the remains of the house with renewed urgency, you look through remembered closets and estimate the locations of valuables, no longer concerned with what has survived. The wardrobe in your mom's room has been split open like a melon, some clothes trailing from it, others in a suspicious pile. The clothes don't look storm-battered because they stayed safe in the wardrobe until survivors emerged from basements, seeing the world as theirs. Exploring.

Forget your family, forget your house. It's just a house, on a nameless street. Free pickings. You go through ruins methodically, looking for safes or cars or anything shiny. You

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pick up a plate that was glazed in a kiddy pottery class, weird greens and browns, and toss it like a frisbee at a tree trunk in the distance, which is split in half with jagged edges pointing to the sky. You find a dry chest of leather-bound books cracked along the spines, well-loved, probably first editions, useful for keeping you warm another night in this lonely wasteland.

You're not a heartless looter; you're a survivor. Logical, calculated, unburdened.

You shift your backpack, which rests heavily on your shoulders, and leave no footprints.

You don't see a soul.

Stop imagining.

You were walking through a fictional house loosely based on mine. What will you do to my home, with its clutter of failed art projects and clothes that don't fit anymore? Will you rescue the cactus that fell out of its shallow pot but is still plump and green, roots clawing at the air? Just leave it alone, reclaimed by the wilderness, and maybe that cactus can still survive.

I was also imagining myself as you, a girl both old enough to understand yet young enough to be carefree—in hindsight, a perfect being I wanted to be.

I did start over once, only once, but I was around the age of your little sister and did not truly remember. If I had lived

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through the process of a family home being reduced to the contents of two suitcases per passenger, if I had seen and remembered

all the selling and throwing away, would I have bothered to put

posters up, picked the paint, built the bookshelf, watered my plants? Why do I keep collecting things? I know I will.

What if a hundred-year storm comes tomorrow and again next week? Will you evacuate immediately? Or pack the car full and risk the hail?

To build a home, to put effort into an object with the possibility that it will be gone . . . Heirlooms will be stolen, broken, stuffed animals will go up in flames. Years later, you might still be there in my imagined world, picking your way through the rubble, slipping little things into your pockets with a smile.

AUTHOR BIO

Lin Lune is a Toronto-based writer and spoken-word artist. Her work invokes deep thought about the human condition. She was on the BAM! Toronto Youth Slam team, which performed at the Toronto Poetry Slam finals, and she was featured at the Kingston WritersFest and on CFRC 101.9 FM radio. She has also been published in the Alexandria Quarterly, Free Lit Magazine, and the inaugural issue of in:cite. After going to the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational with Queen's University, Lin just wants to give love and a score of 10 to every poet who ever existed.