

The Unfinished House

by Con Chapman

There was, on the street where we lived, an unfinished house—
incomplete in ways you didn't notice at first;
no stairs up the porch to the front door,
no walkway to the porch. The type of details
that were left undone let a person know that
tradesmen, visitors and strangers were not welcome.



Inside lived an old woman, or at least old to us kids.
We'd see her sometimes through the windows, which
had no curtains, or maybe in her car before she drove
into her garage, which opened into her house. You saw
about as much of her as somebody's gin rummy hand held
close to the breast; in plain sight, but her back was turned.



Such a provocation to a gang of young boys, and yet none of us had the guts or the callousness to bother her enough to react to us. She had a chain-link fence around her yard, all the way out to the property line. There was no gate, so none of us ever got any closer to trick or treat, or to chase a ball.

The story our parents told us was that she'd figured out a way to save money on her property taxes. Until her house was finished, it was undeveloped

even though she slept there every night, and kept a fire going in one fireplace all winter long. She was shrewd, crazy like a fox, my mom said.



I don't know who told me the other version of her life, and which was true; that she had been engaged to be married to a man more dashing and handsome than she expected. That she had built the house with money she'd inherited from her family, and that the money, and not love, was the reason he was attracted to her.



The banns had been published, and they would move in when they got back from their honeymoon, the house would be finished by then. But something happened; the man discovered he couldn't live for money alone, or maybe he found another woman just as rich but prettier. Either way, he was gone.



And so the house stood there, unfinished, like the heart she had built for him. She saved on taxes, yes, but also on expenditures of emotion. She needed nobody, and nobody needed her. She grew used to it and, like an unused chimney that's bricked over to conserve heat, she was as cold and indifferent as stone.

