

People Called Our Windows Art

by Katie Moore

There were hardly any windows in the shitty apartments where I grew up.

My Mama had windows when she was a girl, and she always missed them. Ma told me window stories at bedtime, before her night shift at the hospital, windows with curtains and stars outside. She told me in the morning, when she was tired, about big windows full of hot early sun. Her favorites were drafty windows, letting in the temperature every day, air sneaking through the cracks.

Sometimes Ma couldn't get enough air with no windows. She said she felt crazy, like she was trapped in a box; and homeless, because homes had windows. She wrung her hands and tapped her foot, couldn't sleep or sit still to eat. Mama blamed my Pop, for leaving us poor and windowless. She blamed the government, for keeping the poor in a windowless box where the days and nights blurred, the seasons blended into one, and before you knew it you'd been there forever.

It was one of these times that made Mama do what she did.

She did it quietly, in the blue of evening when everyone in the slums knew to mind their business and never noticed anything on purpose.

In the morning people wondered where they came from, the picture frames. Mama hung them everywhere. It started with just a few, in our apartment and outside on the brick. She made walls into

windows. Some were small, like peepholes. Others were so big I couldn't touch the sides if I stretched out my arms.

She hung more each evening, buying them from the thrift stores for quarters, until all the solid walls were full of empty picture frame windows.

For a week the adults stood in groups guessing who did it, why? I never told. Keeping the secret with Mama made me feel big, like a man. The other children ran reckless around the brick buildings, matching the windows to the apartments inside, claiming their favorites. Sometimes I joined in, pretending to be surprised by the new additions I'd helped Ma hang the night before. Mostly, I watched the grown ups as they grouped up closer and closer to the frame windows, finally close enough to reach out and stroke the wood, plain and splintered, gold painted, black lacquered.

Soon, the people started filling the picture frames. Outside they used spray paint on the brick, vivid declarations that they had been there. Some of them used chalk, sketching scenes of a happy indoors remembered from childhood or glimpsed in the movies. Inside they used everything, from pencils to paint. Some of them wrote words, poetry. Others let us pretend we were in the country, on a mountain, under water. We had sunny days and rainy days every day, and night stars all the time.

Me and Mama had our favorites. She liked portraits of important people, JFK and John Travolta the most. I liked the pictures of far away places, painted by people who had only heard of them, or maybe seen them in a book. I remember Paris in purple and blue, and Oz with green towers and red flowers. I thought Oz was a real place. We both loved the picture of Baby Pat with chubby cheeks. Mrs. O'Keefe cried while she painted him right beside her door. He hadn't made it through the flu that year, and I think we all missed him.

The windows, simple picture frames, had the power to make us smile, forget we were poor, cry, laugh, read a poem, and heal a little.

Since no one knew it was my Mama hanging the frames, a letter went to every apartment. It said to stop, to remove the frames, to repair the damage we'd done by defacing our walls, which were government property and not ours at all. Ma threw our letter in the trash. Several people gathered around to burn theirs on the netless tennis court. They were more than just my Mama's windows.

When the people came to take the frames down, a crowd gathered. They mumbled and jostled. Some of the younger men stood too close to the workers. The cops came. They stood just apart from the crowd, watching, their arms crossed or their hands hovering around the pepper spray strapped to their belts. When Mr. Robertson saw them he dropped his cane, clutched his chest, and started hollering about the old days. "Selma! Selma, I was there! You keep away from here! We ain't doing nothing wrong, Whitey!" The cops, mostly black, just laughed.

More city people came, with paint the wrong color for the inside, leaving the walls like patchwork. They came with loud jets of water for the bricks, years of city grime washed away with the chalk and paint. The crowds didn't gather then. They stayed behind their doors, with frame windows they had hung and painted themselves.

My Mama didn't stay inside. She watched, crying silently, biting her lip till it bled. I held her hand and felt her vibrate with anger. We didn't say a word when they painted over the John Travolta, or the Paris skyline. Ma cried hardest when the JFK was gone, but for me it was the Baby Pat.

At bedtime that night she told me, "Boy, I learned something about windows. It's not the window that matters, it's the view, sugar, the view."

A week passed, we spent it staring at the empty walls inside and out, everyone wishing for frames to fill with the world they wanted to see. Mama said we didn't have money for picture frames, and it didn't matter because the city would only tear them down again.

One morning we heard noises outside our door. We both thought the city had come to rid our apartments of windows and finish the job of boxing us in again, but when she opened the door she found frames. There were six, the thrift store kind Mama liked.

She cried, and laughed at the same time. Ma slapped her thighs and sat on the floor laughing and crying. I laughed too, but I didn't cry. I was too little back then to cry happy tears. That night she hung those six frames, three inside over the cities patchy paint job, and three outside on the newly clean canvas of brick. She came back smiling, and at bedtime we wondered together what views would fill the new windows.

Almost every day new frames showed up outside our door, at all times of day and night. We never knew who left them, but we guessed it was everyone. We wondered who figured out our secret, but it was fun not knowing. Mama hung the frames and the people filled them with new portraits, a new OZ. Mrs. O' Keefe painted a new Baby Pat, with even fatter little cheeks. The city came to take them down and clean the walls. Again and again, until news cameras showed up and people called our windows art, tourists braving the reputation of the inner city to take photographs and offer all of us children apples and candy our Mamas wouldn't let us eat.

Once people outside the projects noticed, voters with money and opinions, the city left us alone. Eventually they added us to the brochure they give to tourists.

The people often painted over their own windows, leaving a blank canvas for the next view. When the frames got too old, Ma replaced them. We might have been poor as dirt, but we had the best scenery.

When I finally moved away and tried to take Mama with me, she said she couldn't leave her windows, and I didn't really mind. I was glad to always have a reason to go back there as a son instead of a visitor.

When Ma passed on it was quiet. She never even knew she was sick. The neighbors who found her and called me also found her empty frames, waiting to be needed, and took them.

Someone hung those frames in a row beside that broke down tennis court, and the people filled them with the history of our windows. There's Ma hanging the first frame, the first artists painting the first views, the city stripping our windows away, the cops laughing, the windows going up again, the news cameras and tourists.

The other windows change, but those always show the same view, and I go home to visit Ma instead of the cemetery. I don't like to think about Mama in the ground, boxed up again. If she's anywhere on this Earth, it's there looking in and out of windows.

