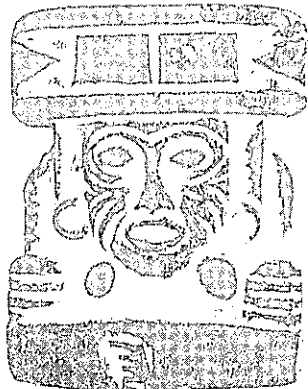


the lost

TINKI



PALACES

of detroit

stories by
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walked out there and strolled right up to the half-wall that spanned the perimeter of the roof. I pushed aside the image of me leaping, soaring out over the street, to land with a hollow wet *foomp*. I took a taut breath and I looked out at the city beneath me.

Before long, I started to relax. First by focusing on the horizon, velvet black and studded with golden light; then on the darkened carcasses of the empty buildings I had explored—all that history soon to be gone. Finally, my eyes settled on the new buildings going up, their shiny exteriors, work sites mercury bright even in the nighttime, the cranes and other leviathans that moved earth and girders from one place to another. I saw that the old city was going away.

Walking back down the stairs, stumbling in the dim, I tapped my Mag Lite against my thigh and its sudden beam blipped me into brightness. It was then I happened to notice some cans of spray paint on the ground in the staircase. I picked one up, gave it a good shake, and then wrote my name on the cleanest wall I could find.

the lost tiki palaces of detroit

I was on the bus, heading down Woodward Avenue. We had just stopped at West Grand Boulevard and I craned my neck to check out the former site of the Mauna Loa. I probably do this once a week on the bus on my way to work. I try to imagine how the place must have looked there in the New Center: a massive Polynesian temple, its thatched A-frame entryway flanked by flaming torches and swaying winter-proof palm trees on a gently rippling man-made lagoon—nestled among the cathedrals of twentieth-century V-8 Hydromatic Commerce, just across the street from where they decided the pitiful fate of the Corvair.

I have an extensive collection of tiki mugs. My rarest are from the Mauna Loa. I own the Polynesian Pigeon, a section of ceramic bamboo with an exotic bird for a handle. Also the Baha Lana, an ebony tiki head sticking his tongue out at the drinker. Both say “*Design by Mauna Loa Detroit*” on the bottom.

There were high hopes for the place. It was to be the largest South Seas

supper club of its kind in the Midwest. (Second only to the majestic Kahiki of Columbus, Ohio, now fallen to the wrecking ball since greedy owners sold to Walgreen's.) Over two million dollars were spent on this paradisiacal bastion of splendor, a lot of money in the late sixties.

There were five different dining rooms at the Mauna Loa (Tonga, Pa-peete, Bombay, Lanai, and one other that I forget), as well as the lavish Monkey Bar, which featured a Lucite bar-top with 1,250 Chinese coins embedded in it and bar tables made from brass hatch covers from trading schooners. A waterfall scurried down a mountainette of volcanic lava into a grotto lush with palm trees and flaming tikis. The waiters wore Mandarin jackets and turbans as they served you.

The Mauna Loa opened in August of 1967. Barely a month after the worst race riot in Detroit's history. It lasted not quite two years.

"I'm invisible!"

That's what the homeless man on the bus keeps saying. He boarded at West Grand Boulevard and none of us dared look at him. But then you never look anyone in the eye on the bus. All gazes are cast peripherally, on the down low. With the homeless man, we simply examined the air around him. Even the bus driver, a large man, blue-black and stoic, who never says more than a word or two to anyone as they board, looked away as the guy paid his fare. We all knew someone got on, but we weren't sure *who* it was. He could be smelled but not seen. The homeless man must have walked down the aisle defiantly, as if daring anyone to say something to him.

"That's right! I'm invisible!"

What could we say? We had all looked away. *We* made him invisible.

I was pretty sure that he was sitting three aisles up from me on the other side. The bus wasn't nearly as full as it usually was on a Monday—President's Day or some such nonsense. I kept my eyes on my newspaper, but they kept

straying out the window searching for landmarks, lost ones as well as those still standing. I gazed upon a beautiful old abandoned factory from the twenties, with a sign that read:

AMERICAN BEAUTY ELECTRIC IRONS

I kept my ears open. I felt the homeless man's eyes on me. I wanted to look, but didn't want him to catch me looking because I wasn't sure what he would say. When I felt his eyes leave me, I glanced forward into the bus, at the spaces around him.

A little boy, about two years old, sitting in the seat in front of him, was the only one that truly acknowledged the homeless man's existence. The little boy looked over the back of the seat at the homeless man, and started playing peek-a-boo with him. The man cracked a bitter half-smile at the child. Then he said it again:

"I'm invisible!"

I was frankly kind of impressed that the guy would say something like this. I don't expect a homeless guy on the bus to say such things, strange and existential—an awl to the heart. It made me think—*he understands his condition*. I thought about Ralph Ellison. The homeless guy looked around and repeated it yet again as he looked around at the rest of us on the bus.

The bus driver turned, scowled, but said nothing.

I looked away just before the homeless man saw me looking. He knew I had looked. Luckily, the child distracted him again. When I looked back, I saw him smile again at the child, wider this time, a grisly green and yellow smile, the school colors of the university we were now passing.

Then the child's mother, reading her own paper, realized what had been going on. She sat the little boy straight down in his seat, flashing a harsh glance behind her.

This set him off. His gestures suddenly grew more animated. It was as if he had decided he would show us what an invisible homeless man on a city bus could do. He pointed out the window at a young woman in a short skirt and yelled to everyone in the bus:

“Look at the titties on her! Lookit them titties! Let me off!”

The bus didn’t stop. Everybody stayed quiet. An older man across the aisle from me sighed and looked out the window. A cane was leaned against the empty seat next to him.

As we continued down Woodward, we approached the Fox Theatre. A block or two behind it, down Montcalm, I could catch a glimpse of the old Chin Tiki. By all rights, I should not be able to see three blocks behind a major building to spot another, but behind the Fox, save for a fire station and an abandoned party store, there are mostly empty fields, now used for parking for the new stadiums, baseball and football, on the east side of Woodward. For that moment, I can see the Chin Tiki’s Polynesian facade, its doorway arched and pointed, the shape of hands praying. To whom? Some great invisible Tiki God? Perhaps Chango: god of fire, lightning, force, war, and virility.

That would be a good guess. For Marvin Chin actually opened his tiki bar when the riots were going on, around the same time as the Mauna Loa. Fires were everywhere in the city then, but not at the Chin Tiki. It would survive to become quite the popular place. Our parents ate there (when they dared venture downtown), as well as the stars: Streisand, DiMaggio, Muhammad Ali.

It held on until 1980, when it too closed up. But unlike the Mauna Loa, which suffered an ignoble end as a lowly seafood restaurant that eventually burned to the ground, the Chin Tiki was simply shuttered, all its Tiki treasures packed up and mothballed inside. To this day, it is still sealed up, a Tiki tomb of Tutankhamen, still owned by the Chin family, who are supposedly

waiting it out, waiting for the inevitable gentrification. It will happen. Or it will become another parking lot. In the meantime, the place had a brief resurrection when Eminem used it to film a scene for *8 Mile*.

Chango works in mysterious ways.

“Hey, white man!”

Without thinking, I turn and look at the homeless man. Apparently, I’m not so invisible to him.

“What you doing here?”

Everyone on the bus is obliquely looking at me now. I have to say something.

“I’m going to work,” I reply, coolly.

“What you on our bus for?”

“I’m just going to work,” I repeat, then turn away and look out the window at the old Tele-Arts. It was a newsreel theater in my mother’s time, but now it’s been turned into some sort of swanky nightclub.

“Motherfucker on our bus.”

“Shut your mouth,” says the woman with the child in front of him. She’s not sticking up for me, I know. She means that language in front of her child.

“Motherfucker.”

Slowly she turns back to him, eyes like smoldering carbon. “You want to be invisible? I’ll *make* you invisible.”

She says it in that way that many black women have, that way that makes most anybody shut up if they know what’s good for them. It certainly works on me, not that I invite that sort of thing. I mind my own business. It’s the only way to be when you’re the only white person on the bus, *the cue ball effect*, as a friend of mine calls it.

The homeless man quiets down for the moment. We’re farther down Woodward now. I look out the window at the storefronts, facades ripped off,

gaping wide open into the street. They are being gutted for new lofts, many of them right across from the old J. L. Hudson's site, where the behemoth department store was imploded. It is now replaced by a giant new skyscraper built by a software billionaire.

When things like this happen, the world starts to pay attention. *Detroit is a city reborn! Back from the dead! Rising from the ashes!* They can see us again. We were always there, but transparent, the way you can see right through the exoskeleton of the Michigan Central train station.

To the rest of the world, Detroit was just a place where Japanese film crews showed up every year to photograph the house fires on Halloween Eve, a.k.a., *Devil's night*. Other than that, they hardly saw us. We don't even show up on the city temperature listings on the Weather Channel.

Farther up, through one of the construction sites I catch a glimpse of the old Statler Hilton Hotel, once proud home of Trader Vic's. The building has been ignored for so long the windows are no longer even boarded up. The Michigan weather is not kind to a man-made tropical oasis. Inside, columns of bamboo once seemed to shore up rattan-wrapped walls. Glowing blowfish and a native kayak hung from the ceiling, along with colored globes encased in fishnets. At the front door, where a stoic Moai once stood sentry, there is rubble. Long pieces of terra-cotta tile still surround the front door, ragged with metal mesh, depicting the faces of tiki gods, mouths contorted, faces squinched into pained grimaces.

A Tyree Guyton lavender polka dot has now been painted on the door. He of the Heidelberg Project, a block-long art project composed completely of discarded objects: a gutted polka dot Rosa Parks bus, a backyard of vacuum cleaners, a tree of shoes. These dots appear on abandoned buildings all over the city. Cheery carbuncles that make sudden art of blight. What else can you do?

The story for Trader Vic's is much the same as the Chin Tiki and the

Mauna Loa. When the white folks disappeared from downtown Detroit at the end of the workday in the seventies, the clubs and restaurants foundered. The building is now slated for demolition, but it's been a ghost for decades. "Demolished by Neglect" as the preservationists like to say around here. They say it a lot.

I am chagrined to relate that I have been part of that demolition as well. One night, in a drunken tiki frenzy, some friends and I brought crowbars to this very site and ripped terra-cotta tiles from the facade of the building. No one was using them anymore, right? That's what we told ourselves. It was wrong, and I knew it. I think of my offense to the tiki gods when I look at my filched tile, which now resides in my backyard. Shame on me, I say. Shame. Yet these agonies of all our pasts will soon be ground into dust in the middle of the night, the preferred time to start the demolition of historic buildings here in Detroit.

Down one street, there is a sign on the side of a car wash: HAND WASH TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

"Motherfucker on our bus," I hear the homeless man mutter. I really wish he would stop saying that.

We pass by more construction sites. Things are changing here. New buildings push out the grand old ones, like bullies in a big rush. When you go downtown at night there are people there now, suburban people, city people, doing things, spending money.

"Hey white man! Why don't you go back to Livonia?" says the homeless man.

I ignore him. Nothing bad is going to happen, for some reason I know this. Yet it alarms me when I hear a startled inhalation, a collective *huh!* roll through the bus. I turn to look at the invisible man and I see that he now has dropped filthy trou and is displaying his penis to me and everyone else on the bus.

Frankly, I'm kind of relieved. An act of aggression, but a harmless one.

"I ain't too invisible now, am I, motherfuckers?" he yells, waving his spotted pete at everyone on board. To be on the safe side, I clutch my thermos, figuring it will work well as a cudgel if I need to use it that way. Taunt me, yes. Piss on me? I don't think so.

Still, it's a relief when the driver pulls the bus over right next to a construction site, stomps down the aisle and tells the now very visible homeless man to walk his raggedy ass off his bus. *Right now.*

With great dignity, the homeless man pulls up his pants, turns, and exits. When the pneumatic doors close behind him, there is only the smell of him left. The woman with the child looks sternly at me. She is holding her child closely, protecting him, her lips squeezed tight.

For a moment, I try not to laugh about what just happened, but just can't help myself. She looks at me, puts a hand over her mouth, but soon her head is shaking and she can no longer hold it in. Everyone on the bus starts laughing. Up in the rearview mirror, I can even see the driver smiling.