

As We All Should Lie

Jonathan Ball

Whatever happened took place in the night. When I awoke, when we all awoke, our backyards, once separated by thin fences, stood a full block apart. Divided by a large, empty lot and two thin streets.

I first saw this new block that had sprung from the ether when I went out to feed Einstein, stupidest of dogs. The invisible hands that reshaped the land had met in my backyard just inside the fence. When they pulled apart to separate my once-neighbour Sarah from me, they dragged the once-common fence along with her. And from my now-fenceless backyard the dog had fled. As though from so tremendous a force there could be some banal escape.

I stepped out into the impossible street that ran where Sarah's yard had once lain. It supported me like a real street would. Already there were potholes. A car's horn jarred me back into the house.

In the kitchen I stared into an empty cup. Then the doorbell rang. Sarah. From across the new block. She told me she'd driven around it rather than walk across.

Then madness, a flood of people, conferences on back lawns, across remaining fences — talk, endless talk, and at the end of the day, at the end of it all, we still knew nothing, know nothing.

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City officials grumbled about whose problem this was, this impossible block. While they argued, they sent forth surveyors. Then fired them and sent forth more. When the second team came back with the same findings for which the first had been fired, a chill settled into the city that even the record summer heat could not drive out.

The surveyors agreed that although this new block *did* take up space, it nevertheless *did not* alter the physical landscape outside of its immediate area. The block appeared between 3rd St. and 4th St., below 16th Ave. and above 15th Ave., but these streets stood unmoved. Nothing had been changed in the surrounding landscape, but somehow the block had been added — the empty block and its new framing streets, which connected to the aforementioned avenues as if having been there always.

And yet the block did not change the world around it. The streets remained straight, did not bulge.

There was just *more* in the city now, *more* between those streets than before. There was *more* and the *more* could be measured. Static and unchanging. Abiding by the physical laws of this universe, although its appearance and persistence stood in plain refutation of those laws.

A bubble — a rectangular, block-shaped bubble — had erupted in the fabric of space and *more* of the world had risen to fill it, without otherwise disturbing the surface of the (until now) ordinary world.

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Dazed and panicked, City Hall responded with insane disavowal in true bureaucratic form. It named the new streets 3A and 4A and announced that, pending negative results of a test for radiation at the site, its real estate would be zoned residentially (in accordance with the surrounding area) and auctioned off.

Almost immediately, a fierce bidding war ensued, driving the property value of the now-named “Block A” up beyond meaning. While developers fought, and Calgary rushed to introduce a complex array of senseless bylaws, in a strange turn the property value of everything surrounding Block A plummeted. Nobody wanted to live near this philosophical disaster.

Everyone else sold, most to speculators who intended to hold the property while staying far away from their new “homes.” Only I remained after the first night. The others in the neighbourhood stayed with friends, family, lovers, or in hotels until their sales went through. Sarah moved back in with her ex-husband.

I stayed in case Einstein returned. And every morning stepped out back into the nightmare. Before she left, Sarah begged me to come with her. She knew that I had no one, said that David wouldn't mind. Of course he would have, but it didn't matter. I had to stay.

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Soon, crowds appeared. Tourists, first from across the city, but then from across the globe. As Block A became international news, a steady stream of travellers arrived, suitcases bursting with excitement. First, they circled the block. Then, after they'd built up enough courage, stepped into the heart of its mystery. Then nothing. Despite its extraordinary origins, Block A disappointed. A browning field of grass between two thin strips of pockmarked pavement.

The crowds dwindled, but interest in the block renewed when a mad development firm succeeded in securing the land rights. They brought in an avant-garde architect to design the new houses, which spilled over and twisted around one another, often sharing walls, almost sharing rooms, in some snaking perversion of suburbia that might have seemed natural in a parallel universe. Although these houses depressed the property values of the surrounding homes even further, they themselves demanded incredible prices.

For a while, then, Block A became home to wealthy eccentrics who were happy enough living there, although discouraged each morning to find they had not been whisked away by aliens or into an inter-dimensional portal during the night. In the middle of it all, my modest bungalow, ruining the view.

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Sarah started calling. She never visited. She began reminiscing about the years we'd known each other, as if talking to a friend at my funeral. Then she started confessing secrets to me, as if I were a nameless listener on a help line. Then she called to say I scared her and she never called again.

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People speculated on the cause of the block's appearance, the most popular conspiracy theories involving extraterrestrials or terrorists. A gaggle of

scientists secured research grants to study the area, but learned nothing. Block A became a hot academic topic, but hundreds of doctoral theses and journal articles later, the world was no closer to any sensible answer to its quiet but unceasing question.

It became apparent that Block A intended to neither yield its mysteries nor produce new ones. Fascination dimmed and then diminished. The eccentrics moved away and let their twisted mansions rot.

Though Block A left an indelible mark upon the planet's skin, it did nothing to aggravate the wound. The world went on, dragging Block A with it. Assimilated into a universe that refused its possibility but had not denied its entry.

As for me, I wrote this down. But it was difficult and took many years. And yet so much is missing. The account so short, unremarkable — unrevealing.

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How is it that impossible things can appear, spit blank stares into our faces, and remain mute? Since we cannot look away, after some initial panic we make a show of ignoring them.

But I refuse to ignore this. I no longer sleep at night, surrounded by empty houses, with this chaos out the window at the foot of my bed. I no longer sleep, I just pretend.

I lie awake, as we all should lie, and await the coming of Block B.

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