

Where's Martin's Place?

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On June 24th 2017, there was a massacre in the middle of Martin Place.

I saw the whole thing, although I'm still not sure what I saw. There were no bullet casings or craters or shotgun pellet pocked walls, not a trace that anything remotely out of the ordinary had happened. But I can still feel a fissure in the concrete whenever I walk by where it all happened.

I think I'll feel it as long as I live, although if I'm perfectly honest I struggle to remember all the details. The previous night I was hunched next to the heater, punching another post-breakup pity bong, when my phone vibrated.

It was a text from my friend Alice (who I was a bit sweet on) asking for my help with something very early the next morning. In the limited constellation of my life back then, Alice was a planet. I'd been pulled into their orbit through uni, and I ended up getting involved with a not-for-profit tutoring service they created. Despite the fact that at 5'2 they could be comfortably stowed in a carry-on, Alice towered in my imagination: a blur of hot pink pom-pom earrings and organisational prowess and black leather and incessant action. Their laughter swept you up among cumuli.

Me, I was more a self-absorbed stoner with back problems, and so out of celestial admiration I would've rocked up had they invited me to a recruitment drive for the Peshmerga. I set my alarm for two hours later and stared at the ceiling blankly, trying in vain to imagine what could be in store.

I arrived at 4am to find the city deserted, dead neon and pavement bled by the street cleaner. Winds tore across the wet concrete, every exposed pore meat-hooked by the cold. I clasped my balls with blue granite hands and wondered what the fuck I was doing there. I met up with Alice outside St James station. We hugged briefly and walked briskly to Martin Place where it was all going down.

Unknown to me, a war had been waged in Sydney.

This war was characteristic of modern combat in that neither side really understood what the other was fighting for. For the aggrieved it was a passionate, desperate campaign against a lifetime of subjugation, against a system of reality which spat *on*, sneered *at*, but rarely spoke *to* their existence.

For the aggressors, their actions were neither oppressive nor war-like. Rather, they were the harsh but necessary enforcement of the same laws which apply to everyone in equal measures. An enforcement of a system of reality which creates, maintains and reproduces their sense of self and position in society. Cloaked in Lendlease hi-vis vests and hard-hats, wielding a letter with a CITY OF SYDNEY letterhead, reinforced by council workers with gerni hoses and dump trucks, flanked by stone-faced cops, the aggressors' *raison d'être* was *"the reasonable comfort and convenience of other users of Martin Place"*.

For the last six months the comfort and convenience of Martin Place's 'other' users had been rudely disrupted, by the presence of a large, self-organised community of rough sleepers. The camp was nestled under an awning

incidentally created by the scaffolding of a \$300 million Lendlease construction project, which jutted out over the sidewalk opposite the Reserve Bank. This community hosted a 24/7 kitchen which used donated goods to serve hundreds of meals a day. The camp had been largely created by two people, Donna Bartlett and Lanz Priestly. Over time they established a library, a clothing exchange and an informal employment agency. Rough sleepers could leave their possessions there safely while they went to appointments or job interviews, there was a first aid kit for basic injuries and a supply of Narcan (naloxone) in case of overdoses. For many residents this was the only space in the city they felt safe- a large part of the demographic were women (the fastest growing group experiencing homelessness in Australia is women over 55), who routinely faced harassment and the threat of assault sleeping elsewhere. On rainy nights over 50 people would sleep there, on mattresses, bunk beds, in swags and rags and blankets, playing cards or the battered piano someone had dragged in; together.

I learnt all this as I helped tear it down.

Alice had lived on the streets themselves for a while and was involved in lots of activism. They learned from friends that the City of Sydney, after conducting several raids on the Martin Place community over the preceding months, intended to destroy the site the next day at dawn. A flurry of communication overnight led to about 15 people gathered at the street kitchen the next morning, stamping their feet in the cold. Someone handed me a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate which I nursed gratefully. It was a motley crew: Alice and I, some other young uni students (predominantly women), some guy in a full-on Fidel Castro outfit who seemed ready for anything, directed by Lanz and Donna. The plan was (to me) hazy. We were to try and delay the move-on process as long as possible, to obstruct and obfuscate, while journalists would hopefully come and draw attention to what was going on. I was sceptical, but also wildly out of my depth so I kept my mouth shut.

At dawn the first trucks began accumulating at the top of the **FLASHPOINT**. They assembled in even rows, militarily precise, with huge empty trays waiting to be filled with

matted blankets and

piano keys and

piss-stained mattresses and

pillows and

forgotten trackies and

chalk dust and

couches and

mandarin peels and

court documents and

love letters and

tenderly used pallets and

nylon guitar strings and

plastic cutlery and

locks of hair and

foil medical packaging and

all the other artefacts and detritus found in a home without walls.

For the next few uneasy hours the aggressors marshalled their forces, swelling in size at the top of the hill, the sun's rays casting long mechanical shadows as it rose behind their backs.

At 9am a City of Sydney representative brusquely handed out a letter to the camp's residents.

"The accumulation of items in Martin Place, including a barbecue, gas bottles, tents, food and other items has been determined to be a public nuisance as it materially affects the reasonable comfort and convenience of other users of Martin Place."

The trucks moved in.

Anything unclaimed was swallowed up and spat back up in some distant lightly air-conditioned City of Sydney depot. Everyone who'd called the camp home was directed to a hastily erected pavilion at the top of Martin Place, manned by FACS (Family and Community Services) forced smiles offering a few nights crisis accommodation in a motel. Us in the resistance ended up just helping the camp residents move their belongings out from under the scaffolding and across the plaza while council workers hosed out any remnant memories into the gutters.

I found myself crying uncontrollably.

The City of Sydney letter glaringly omitted any reference to the beautiful, resilient people who'd made their home in Martin Place. The mattresses, piano keys and plastic cutlery outweighed the humans who used them. It rendered them immaterial. I couldn't fathom how the government could be so callous, so wilfully ignorant to the genius of the self-organised camp community, how they could drive them from the only thing that *had* worked into the arms of a system which evidently *hadn't*.

Lanz, Donna, the residents though? They didn't bat an eye. Sure, they were upset - Lanz barked orders, furiously trying to preserve what little he could, while Donna sat sadly on a mound of possessions, focused at the centre of everything.

But it was just another battle for them.

Ultimately, the camp morphed into 'Tent City', which was cleared out again a few months down the line. Lendlease boarded up the space under their scaffolding and the development was finished last year. Alice and I haven't spoken in two years. Further down the hill there's a statue commemorating ANZAC troops who died in WW1, but nothing in remembrance of what was massacred 100 metres up the hill.

We forget what is not written.