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*Don't Go*

Julia Dickens

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*"Toronto is sometimes described as a "city of neighbourhoods." It seems an odd description, since nearly all cities contain neighbourhoods, but it is intended to imply that Toronto's neighbourhoods are especially varied and distinctive. However, neighbourhoods are not fixed entities. Although some neighbourhoods change very little in their physical, social, and demographic composition over time, others may change significantly in the course of a few years... The City of Toronto's neighbourhood transition has been relatively sudden and dramatic, and the changes have serious consequences for Toronto residents."*

- J. David Hulchanski, *The Three Cities Within Toronto*

Julia Dickens is an Ottawa-born, Toronto-based artist, illustrator and zine-maker currently completing a Bachelor of Design in Illustration at OCAD U. Working primarily in 2-dimensional mediums, her practice uses figurative drawing, painting and text work to explore representations of memory and personal experience.

*Don't Go* is part of an ongoing attempt to face a specific fear formed from both personal experience and observations of changes within her community due to gentrification. The spaces that we consider homes, both physically and emotionally, are constantly subject to upheaval and displacement, oftentimes unwanted. In this work, the phrase "Never Leave" becomes both an affectionate request and a threatening plea. It speaks of a desperation to halt the trajectory of time, from which the loss of what we cherish most will inevitably ensue.

'Home' is a recurring theme in Dickens' work. More than a physical entity, the concept of 'home' communicates the sentimental and sweet notion of a forgiving and stable place that can always be returned to. The reality, of course, is that most of us bear a more complicated relationship with the place we are from. In her own case she admits "an underlying sadness to that sweet emotion", as the idea of a stable and timeless 'home' meshes with the realities of moving, loss of possessions, renovation, and perhaps the departure of siblings, the passing of a parent, divorce and remarriage.

These twinned notions of home and leaving are particularly poignant in the city with Canada's largest migrant population: over half of Torontonians were born outside of the country, and another large percentage have moved here from within it. For these people,

the multiplicity of 'home' means that the memory of a place may be more strongly related to than the physical structure in which they currently reside.

For a large percentage of Torontonians, the concept of 'home' is further threatened by the shifting tidal waves of gentrification. While growth and change in any city is inevitable, Toronto's economic polarization has been unusually swift: in a short 35-year timespan, Toronto's rich and poor neighbourhoods have virtually swapped places, with wealth flooding the centre of the city as the rich outbid the poor for access to desirable services and entertainment. The middle-income area of the city has disappeared at an alarming rate, while a substantial number of people have moved into the lower-income sphere. In simple terms: the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. 66% of Toronto neighbourhoods were middle-income in 1970, contrasted to 29% today. Conversely, the number of low-income neighbourhoods has risen from 19% to 53% in the same time period. A clear concentration of wealth and poverty is emerging, and with it Toronto's distinctive neighbourhoods - complex blends of physical, social, and psychological attributes - are being redefined.<sup>1</sup>

Artists and galleries have always played a difficult role in this shift. The basic narrative of gentrification posits their arrival in a neighbourhood as a first step in the process. Yet, with a low ownership rate, they are also among the precarious populations forced out when a neighbourhood becomes desirable to a higher income bracket. Dickens herself is currently experiencing this phenomenon firsthand as a resident of one of Toronto's few remaining artist lofts, located southwest of King and Bathurst in the condo-dominated neighbourhood of Niagara. She is amongst dozens of artists living and working in the heritage building known colloquially as the Coffin Factory, which is slated to become a post-industrial condo development within the next few years.

A wolf-in-sheep's-clothing scenario, the painting of the house beneath the phrase 'Never Leave' mimics camouflage, a nod to the common practice of condominium developments donning the guise of exactly what they have displaced. The situation at the Coffin Factory seems destined to become yet another textbook example of a tired refrain: evict the original tenants, gut the interiors, but keep the original exterior to lend an "authentic" feel. Market the new structure, literally a shell of its former self, as "genuine artist lofts" - minus the original artists of course.

Even though "Never Leave" is an unreasonable statement, immune to the realities of life, it speaks to a common sentiment. As Dickens says, "Gentrification is horrible because it forces you into the position of leaving, and you have no choice but to move on, to be pushed out of your community... The phrase 'Never Leave' really speaks to the desire to extend a moment, or a place, or a sense of home infinitely, even though it's ultimately impossible."

Neighborhoods fragment further as developers begin to construct identities to market

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<sup>1</sup> J. David Hulchanski, *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005*, <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/cjurp/tncrn/Three-Cities-Within-Toronto-2010-Final.pdf>

specific areas. Xspace, by various reports, is now located in either Brockton Village (the name of the original town located here, which survived on its own for a short 3-years before being annexed by the City of Toronto in 1884), Dufferin Grove Park, Little Portugal, or the newly named DuWest: a moniker that sounds suspiciously like something made-up by a marketing firm with an interest in revamping Dundas street.

At the moment, *Don't Go* looks out over what is still regarded as “an uncharted part of town”<sup>2</sup>, thus far immune to the aggressive creep of condos. As Xspace settles into its new home on Lansdowne, we can pause for a moment to consider the shifts in our city, and to wonder what existed here before, and what this strip will look like in 20 years. Ultimately, the impossible statement “Never Leave” leads to a question: *In the tides of change, what can we hold on to?*

-Kirsten McCrea

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Aguirre-Livingstone, “Dundas West: Toronto’s Next Gentrification Target?”, <http://www.thegridto.com/life/society/the-nocturne-is-duwest-the-next-frontier/>