

Spacing magazine
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Inner Space
Malcolm
By Jay Somerset

My friend Terry lives near King and Dufferin in a dilapidated apartment. From his eleventh-floor balcony, you can almost see the entire city. Terry's been diagnosed with some form of schizophrenia, but he thinks he can beat it; the doctors are wrong. I think so, too. A few months back, I went to visit him. We usually sit around, drink beer, and listen to home recordings Terry makes with his guitar, except this time there was a knock on the door: Malcolm.

"Don't worry, he's harmless," Terry tells me. He opens the door and in walks Malcolm, nearly banging his head on the top of the doorframe. Malcolm is a lanky man with long, straggly black hair. His face is pockmarked and sunburned. He's part native with a touch of something else ("I'm half Irish," he told me, later). He's wearing dirty jeans and a grease-stained jean jacket that conceals something large underneath the right sleeve.

"I'm Malcolm," he says, kindly stretching out his callused hand and looking me in the eye. His speech is slightly slurred, but not just because he might be drunk. He speaks with a rocky cadence and hoarse whisper that can only come from relit found smokes, Golden Wedding rye, and yelling after being kicked awake in the middle of the night. I could barely hear him.

Malcolm lives his life outside the Brock Street liquor store. He's a public fixture of Parkdale, a public figure, a living sculpture of city life. We all know Malcolms, or we've given them change or walked briskly by, ignoring his outstretched hand. He's one of many people who hang out at the corner of Brock and Queen—the type of people *Toronto Life* readers snicker about inside locked cars in the LCBO parking lot.

"I've got some bad news, the recordings didn't work out," says Terry, referring to the last time Malcolm came inside. Terry had invited Malcolm up to play guitar and sing songs. The plan was to burn the

music to CD and then sell copies, with all proceeds going to Malcolm. "But we can record again tonight."

"That's OK," says Malcolm without a flinch, like he's used to bad news. He takes a look around at the messy apartment littered with beer cans and cassette tapes. He pulls out a flattened, patched together cigarette and offers it to me. It's a kind gesture, a welcoming gift. The two of us go out to the balcony.

"I used to have this," he says, referring to the apartment, doors, privacy. "I had a place near Ossington, with my girl. We were living high. Then my depression came on and I left for a few days. I came back but then it would hit again and each time I'd be gone for longer periods. That was a few years ago now." He pauses and looks out at the city lights. We watch as cars enter and exit the McDonald's drive-thru below.

I ask about the bundle in his right sleeve. "I got stabbed a few weeks ago. My arm is all bandaged up," he says. I show him my sad face. "It's no big deal. Some junkie freaked out and came at me. Happens all the time." We pass the smoke back and forth, inhaling it right down to the filter.

"We're ready to go," yells Terry from inside, excited to get recording. Back inside, Malcolm sits down in an old wooden chair, the ones you see stacked in church basements. Terry places a microphone in front of Malcolm and hands him a well-worn acoustic guitar. Terry sits to Malcolm's left and straps on an electric guitar. I slip across the room to the couch by the front door.

Malcolm strums and leans forward in the mic: "Left a good job in the city, workin' for the man ev'ry night and day. But I never lost one minute o' sleepin', worryin' 'bout the way things might have been..." Malcolm's bandaged arm keeps brushing the side of the guitar. He slips from "Proud Mary" into a Joe Walsh song, "...and we don't need the ladies cryin' cause the story's sad, ah ha, cause the rocky mountain way is better than the way we had..." His voice cracks and wobbles as he moves through the classic rock repertoire, songs we've all heard thousands of times, public songs.

A half-hour later, he stops. "Thanks guys. Gotta get going," he says. Go where, I wonder. Terry opens a kitchen cupboard and fills a bag with canned goods, handing the bag to Malcolm.

"How will you open them?" I ask.

"Oh, I've got can openers stashed around the city," says Malcolm.