



APRIL

a Homeless story

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APRIL
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BY
T. RANDALL

APRIL - a Homeless Story, BOOK V

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First addition © 2020 – Publisher:

PREMIER TECHNOLOGIES, INC.

Revised addition © 2021 – Publisher:

PREMIER TECHNOLOGIES, INC.

ISBN:

Soft Copy: 9780985704773

ePub Copy: 9780989738095

Hard Copy:

DISTRIBUTOR:

Book Distribution for Independent Publishers:

Ingram Spark Book Company

One Ingram Blvd.

La Vergne, TN 37086

Print-on-demand Hard & Soft copy:

Lightning Source Inc.

1246 Heil Quaker Blvd.

La Vergne, TN 37086

Book Cover photos provided by Roffna Principe Studio.

Printed in the United States of America

Primary sales outlet, Amazon Books.com

First Printing April, 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

FOREWORD

Homelessness to us, living in a modern society, seems unlikely or at least improbable. To the concerned, it brings up the question: “Why is there homelessness?” With a country economically prospering, on top of having the affluence to benefit its people and industries thriving on international trade, how could there be people, though a minority, living homeless and in destitution? Yes, poverty has been with mankind since the beginning of time and will be with us into the future. It seems illogical to the realistically minded living in a democratically-oriented society with all of its social provisions applied to the people. Where did society go wrong? The answer can be found in the past.

Though homelessness has been around for thousands of years, it is an issue that has yet to be resolved. Since it is considered a stigma by many, I used to be very critical of the homeless society myself. From having been born into the remnants of a WWII-devastated country, Germany, and witnessing destruction and devastation, homelessness to me was widespread but understandable. It only lasted until people rebuilt cities and towns. In today’s prosperous society it seems illogical. However, is it possible that tax payers are overburdened with too great of financial commitments to accommodate humanly underprivileged shortcomings in our nation?

It was not until I researched, investigated, and observed the homeless society that I began to understand the dilemma. It is a two-sided sword hanging over civilization. On the one side we have sufficient social programs to take care of the homeless. But on the other there is a culture insisting on adequate living conditions at ever increasing demands.

Where will it all end?

There is no end to it in the near future.

From the onlooker’s perspective, homelessness seems a creation of a segment of society that is unwilling to conform to the social standards stating that every abled body should work and contribute to society to allow it to grow and flourish. It would seem logical that everybody in the country would have enough pride and responsibility to follow the rules of the majority population. However, this is not the case. The sentiments of the citizens are as diverse as the rules and regulations set forth by the government.

From the homeless point of view, their plight, whether voluntary or caused through poverty or otherwise, deserves an equally important consideration, many times ignored by local authorities.

But why is it mostly ignored?

Because homeless people come from a wide variety of backgrounds and conditions. In today's society, one would think the government and social services provide enough incentives to be able to take care of the homeless predicament but this is not always the case because the majority of homeless refuse to be confined within four walls. Shelters are only used for food and, in extreme cases, as sleeping quarters to keep from freezing in cold months and baking during the summer. For the self-imposed homeless, the preference is to sleep in the open under a starry sky no matter how many shelters are built and how much money is made available.

AUTHOR NOTE

I feel obligated to explain my reasons for writing this book in first place. Yes, there was one time I had also been homeless. It was at the onset of my life's journey. At 21 years of age, after graduating, I left Germany to seek opportunities in Switzerland. Arriving in Zurich after a two-hour train ride, with only 50 DM in my pocket and checking hostels for temporary quarters, I could not secure a room for several days. Homelessness was not prevalent at that time because city ordinances were still strictly enforced. I decided to seek shelter at the only place I could think of, by sleeping in an uncovered rowboat tied at the shores of Lake Zurich. It was only until I could find an empty room to rent that I spent my time in the open. And yes, watching the brilliance of a starry sky with shooting stars cutting across my vision is a spectacular view not easily forgotten.

There were other occasions I found myself in similar situations. During my 30-year career working as a defense contractor for the U.S. government, there were a number of times I felt homeless when arriving in a foreign country without prior reservations or local connections. Where the difficulty comes into play is the language barrier and unfamiliarity of the place. Regardless of the stated incidents, it does not make me an expert on the homeless style of living. What it provided me was a sense of understanding situations a homeless person could encounter.

For this reason, though I was very critical of their homelessness and living conditions, I was not judgmental and accepted their choices, no matter what the circumstances were.

After a successful and rewarding career that began in Philadelphia in 1962, and subsequently migrating to a new home base, San Francisco, in 1977, with a final move in 2008 to Colorado Springs, I have had ample opportunities to observe several cultural changes within the country so dear to me, the United States of America.

Unfortunately for the wellbeing of its citizens, not all of the changes have been encouraging for maintaining the solid foundation the country was built on. Many nations experience political and economic fluctuations with the periodic election of new leadership, and so does the United States.

Fortunately, citizens of this country uphold a strong bond to the democratic constitution the nation was built on. Being a relative newcomer as a nation back then, largely populated from well-established European cultures, it was the pioneering spirit that created the New World quickly, followed by an industrial revolution unlike any other on the planet.

At one time this New World was successfully managed for over two centuries, but as a result of gradual growth and development from its seemingly unlimited resources, it did not remain this way forever. Changes were about to take hold, not only economically, but culturally and socially as well. Within this book, I will describe and illustrate one such change, the addition of a homeless culture destined to remain with us into the future.

I perceived the idea for writing this book from a homeless person I met in 2019 while living in Colorado. I had her approval to illustrate her life in homelessness since her childhood. Unfortunately, events took over our lives that very year, eventually breaking our connection. The world was taken hostage by COVID-19, the worldwide epidemic, which we are still plagued with to this day, in 2021. As a result, the homeless, in many instances, were transported off to shelters and places outside of cities and towns without keeping track of the individuals.

A TRIBUTE TO THE HOMELESS

This tribute is written and dedicated to both my reading audience and the homeless people who provided much material, not so much through individual accounts of their own lives, but more so through my personal observations over several decades.

I have had the good fortune, provided by the U.S. government, to travel extensively not only within the country, but also outside of its borders, and in the process have had the opportunity to gauge foreign cultures against our own. It was this platform that provided me with great insight into other country's problems, as well as with homelessness, not only inherent to the United States but worldwide.

Other countries have the same or similar issues with diverse social behavior not being easily managed. It seems that money does not matter much to the self-imposed homeless. Their objective for a successful life is geared towards a freedom of movement and social independence. I realize that there are three factions when addressing homelessness. One, there are the unfortunate ones landing on the streets who have lost a job, home, family, or income, become too ill to work, or felt culturally deprived of equality. Two, there are the disabled American war veterans, drug and alcohol addicts that cannot perform their jobs, and many other related social victims. Three, there are the nomadic hippies, preppers and survivalists seeking independence from government subjection and social responsibility.

PERSONAL DEDICATION

I have given the subject of Homelessness much thought and consideration over the past year. Since the book is about the fragile life of a homeless woman, I needed a clear understanding for the psychological makeup of the woman. From a male perspective, my dilemma was not to fully understand feelings and emotions taking place within the woman's mind. It was a personal notion that surfaced not only recently. I already noticed the differences from childhood when quietly observing women's behavior, especially entrapped within the close confinements of air raid shelters. I needed a full understanding and it came in the form of my dear neighbor friend, Lyn Reeder.

When discussing my recent work, "April – a Homeless Story" with her, she offered her a copy.

She readily accepted.

I willingly complied.

It'd turned out she was an avid reader. Days later I had her response on the concerns I had with women's emotional perspectives and interests. Her views led me straight to organize my work into a comprehensive and meaningful novel. I am grateful and thankful for it.

"Thank you Lyn."

SPECIAL DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the homeless people in this country struggling to make a living, a living based on freedom and prosperity most enjoy but also take for granted. All may be well, we think, as long as we can enjoy freedom from oppression with liberty provided for all as stated in the Constitution, but this is not the case. The preamble may work for the greater majority of the country's people, but there are cultural and economic exceptions not readily accepted to understand and resolve. It is the exceptions to a people that society has created, whether it evolved by chance or was shaped intentionally, that need our serious consideration. To the majority of citizens living within the parameters of organized society, it may not make much sense to ever consider a life lived in poverty and destitution. It only makes sense when one understands the reasons behind the diversity of social rejections in the society branded as homelessness.

Notwithstanding individual justifications by some homeless people, the underlying reasons for their plight are not simple. Government agencies and social organizations have been trying to solve the homeless issue for many decades without much progress, costing billions of dollars annually, and deprived of a workable solution.

To justify the problem and to be fair to both sides, the government and public making attempts to resolve the growing issue of homelessness, much of the burden is carried by organized society, but it should be carried equally by the homeless themselves, especially when the economy is thriving. It may not be as easy or may even become impossible during severe recession periods as we are presently experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Homelessness, regardless of its apparent hardships, is here to stay.

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PART ONE CALIFORNIA '70s

California, as a state, was divided into two major parts of attractions: the northern region with its tempered climate and rugged cliff line spread out along the ocean front, and the southern region, known for its pristine beaches populated mostly by wave surfers and sun worshippers. But those pleasures were mostly reserved for the local population. Visitors from out of state and tourists from abroad had not yet taken off en masse. That would come with the introduction of Boeing's 747 aircraft, specifically designed to carry large numbers of passengers. However, designs were on the drawing board to implement changes to a leisurely travel existence reserved mostly for the privileged and wealthy. It would take several more years before California would become a Mecca for world travelers.

For one, while America was the leader in industrial evolution following WWII, it took the development of technology to kickstart the new age. Entrepreneurs from other states were seeking out and securing affordable real estate and low cost wage earners to create numerous business parks. One such park became Silicon Valley, to this day, still a major hub of the business world.

Where until such time, San Francisco was a sparsely-visited place reserved mostly for the locals, to leisurely stroll along Beach Street lined with a variety of stores and shops quietly offering their wares, to eventually land on Pier 39 with its prolific barking from sea lions. Seated in the serenity of the place while watching the sunset within the sea breeze, one could already make out a variety of different languages, mostly of Chinese and European origin. In later years, after the Cold War, Russians would become prominent visitors, but that was still fifteen years into the future, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

For now, in 1977, there were a number of other attractions for the local strollers. To get there, one would head in the direction of Columbus Avenue to reach Chinatown, passing numerous Italian restaurants extending their space onto the sidewalk. Regardless of the season, people preferred to be seated outside amidst the bustle of city traffic and pedestrians when taking in the dining flavors served. It was a rare spot in the city, providing a small slice of Italian culture. It's an ancient, inherited custom to share leisure time with neighbors and to keep connected with nature.

Despite the continuous stream of automobiles and busses passing by, it was still quieter out there than the indoor seating, with waiters calling out orders,

dishes being served, TVs mounted against walls broadcasting sports shows or news, and patrons trying to converse in elevated voices.

Then, there was the Embarcadero with its ferry building facing Market Street. Fortunately for the commuters, some were able to have the luxury of daily travel to and from work across the Bay, while the majority of the workforce was stuck in traffic, at times for hours, taking the bridges to their workplaces.

These would be popular attraction spots, but the City had much more to offer, from Union Square to Pacific Heights and beyond. Along the route one could stop to take in scenes at Ft. Mason, the Marina, the Presidio, and Crissy Field before circling back through Lombard Street or Broadway, or stopping at the Coit Tower, Levi Strauss Campus, or Ghirardelli Square, and finishing off the evening at one of the many quaint restaurants one could find on many city blocks. Where other sectors such as the Mission and Market Districts had their special offerings, it was streets like Geary, Grant, Sansome, Mason, Powell, and Battery that attracted attention. This was where the city blossomed.

To finish off the city journey, many would seek out Chinatown to stop for dinner before ending the day. Chinese cuisine was too inviting, with the rich menus offered by the many restaurants along the way, to not take advantage. There is one thing that can be said about Chinese food: no matter what dish one selects for a meal, their hunger will be satisfied and they'll be able to walk out without feeling stuffed. I suppose it was the six thousand years of perfecting their cuisine.

There was one more special place for the city adventurer; hidden away within the complexity of the Cannery was Jack Quinn. What attracted one to the place was the European atmosphere one sensed when taking the first step across the threshold. It was a popular place, which, in time, would attract many tourists. One could detect numerous foreign tongues being spoken. But that was not the aim for the evening. One had the luxury to choose from one of seventy-five brands of selected imports. One could savor beer from a number of countries around the world, from a British Stout or Italian Peroni to a Singha from Thailand or Asahi beer from Japan.

What a place for a thirsty traveler amid a pleasantly amiable environment, hearing the ringing of bells from the ever-fashionable streetcars at the next intersection over, alerting prospective passengers of their arrival. Aside from being a novelty providing a panoramic view in motion into the Bay, despite being crowded at times, tickets were cheap and affordable for anybody,

though locals preferred to hop on and off for a short ride without purchasing the fare before the ticket agent arrived. It was all fun and games for the cunning.

What made San Francisco special was the cleanliness it prided itself in. For the most part, cleaning began even before dawn with an army of broom-carrying sweepers attacking the many streets and sidewalks, primarily in and around places tourists frequented. City administration did its best to keep the city clean. After all, it was this attraction that brought first-time visitors and repeaters back. Though there was one exception: Chinatown. The many trash collection containers discarded by kitchens after closing were tolerated, permeating the alleyways alongside shops and restaurants, now closed for the night, with the intense odors of food waste. An attraction in itself, this delineated Chinatown from the rest of the City.

DAYS OF INNOCENCE

“What a beautiful day,” April, a child ten years of age, thought in the quiet of the morning, pulling the drapes open. The window from her tiny room located on the first floor did not give her much of a view other than of a blue sky overhead, for which she had to crane her head out the window. The horizon was blocked by gray building walls all around her vision. She checked her mom’s room but only heard heavy breathing interrupted by laborious coughs.

“Good,” she muttered, giving her mom the liberty she sought on this brisk but sunny morning. With Mom still asleep, school was not on her mind on this spring day. Though the climate in San Francisco does not vary much through the year, everyone seemed to sense and feel the changes in seasons. It is the steady ocean temperature that keeps the climate stable in the area. While most nights are foggy year around, daytime clears up as soon as the sun makes its appearance.

For April, it would be a day of leisure and exploration. She contemplated walking to Pier 39, the most popular on the wharf, but it would take her forty minutes to cross the city on foot from where she lived, at Mission and 4th Street. It was either the Embarcadero or the south side along the Bay. Today, she decided on the Bay, the closest point. It was only a short distance, within a ten-minute walk. In past years she had made it her mission to explore the once-thriving South Park and Mission Bay, long-deserted places along the East Bay shores, aside from frequently-played baseball games taking place at Oracle Park located at the China Basin.

The way the piers were constructed were that passenger ships docked from Embarcadero Pier 1 to Pier 39 headed west, and cargo ships docked to unload at Pier 2 through Pier 40, separated by the Marina and which continued on to Pier 96. It was there April headed this morning. Her exploration may have seemed like a fruitless effort, but this was not the case. While Pier 1 through 39, due to their clean and organized environment, may have been an attraction for most travelers and local pleasure walks, the even-numbered piers had much more character to them. It was here where the City’s life thrived. It was here where money changed hands between merchants, dealers, gamblers, and whatever illicit bets could be placed.

Chinatown may have been the heart of the city, but this part was the cauldron, boiling with not-so-visible activities. April could spend all day here and never get tired of watching ardent people of different races and cultures bustling their wares. It was here where she found the adventure to satisfy her innocent and curious mind. Though not inclined to classroom discipline and

learning, here was a place to satisfy and saturate her mind with the curiosities life harbored. It was here where she learned to become street smart, a trait not yet realized, directing her future life and survivability out under an open sky.

For now, she enjoyed the world observed through the innocence only an uncluttered mind could have. Not having had breakfast this morning, she could feel her stomach growl. With merchant ships flying foreign flags unloading cargo vans lifted by enormous cranes, there was plenty of food to be snatched after crates were opened within the many warehouses. Since she was a child, innocent in appearance, looking through beautifully-shaped eyes though unkempt in appearance, nobody paid her much attention. People assessed what she was, a street urchin begging for morsels.

Watching activities nearby, her eyes were focused on a sidewalk vendor grilling some meat and vegetable dishes in a Chinese fashion. The aroma was too appealing to ignore. Striding up next to the vendor, her pleading gesture was quickly rewarded with a couple of spring rolls wrapped around stir-fry. She was happy, and the vendor was happy, knowing he'd done his Samaritan deed for the day. It was all April needed to continue on her day's journey.

She found a quiet spot on the pier nearby and lingered there for some time in thoughts focused on her life. At her age all she knew was the limited means provided by her mom. Saddened by this, wishing for a better life than her mom provided, she longed for companionship as well as the toys she'd never had. April quickly learned that she did not fit in with the other children she met in school. She could sense the aura of aversion from other children in classes and at play. Rarely invited to participate in games, she avoided going to school as much as she could get away with by cutting classes.

In first grade she had already gotten in trouble for not showing up, but it was not her fault back then. Her mom had overslept or was still too drunk to see her off to school, resulting in her oversleeping as well. It did not matter how much the teachers reprimanded her and complained to her mom to take action or have April be expelled from school. The idea was welcome to both of them, but the law dictated otherwise. Every child in this nation was obligated by civic law to attend grade school. Threats like this were disregarded by her mom even though child welfare agencies came frequently knocking at their door. All it took was for her mom to speak with one or another client of hers, the city mayor or a council member, to pacify the school's head teacher into ignoring mother and child.

It was this simple if you had the sound connections her mom had with city officials. It might have resolved the immediate situation for her mom, the

irresponsible person that she was, but it did nothing for April's future, leaving her seemingly trapped in a life of destitution and poverty.

For now, April enjoyed her freedom with its abundant variety in values and culture provided by the nation's most beautiful city by the Bay, San Francisco.

NATIONAL CRISIS

Though April, living in poverty, was not aware of the nation's economic crisis periodically appearing and being resolved by state authorities, she was indirectly involved with the lack of proper housing and food with the shortages her mom would or could not provide. The following statistics are brief excerpts from the "Ending Homelessness in Los Angeles" (January 2007) report through the Inter-University Consortium Against Homelessness and authored by Jennifer Wolch, Michael Dear, Gary Blasi, Dan Flaming, Paul Tepper, and Paul Koegel, with Daniel Warshawsky.

Economical

Between 1950 and 1970, during a period of post-war prosperity, the gap between the incomes of rich and poor narrowed. But this trend was reversed in the 1970s, and became entrenched during the '80s in what economists describe as the Great Turnaround. The national economy shifted from manufacturing to service industries, where wages were lowered due to deindustrialization. Over three-quarters of the new jobs created during the 1980s were at minimum-wage levels. By 1983, over 15 percent of Americans were living below the poverty level, even though half of them lived in households with at least one person working.

Housing

In the decade following 1973, 4.5 million units were removed from the nation's housing inventory, primarily occupied by low-income households. In the same period, in contrast, the rise in single-person households dramatically increased the demand for housing across the nation, creating a crisis of unprecedented proportions. The number of poor renter households grew by tens of thousands but the number of affordable units fell dramatically. Virtually no new public housing units were constructed during the 1980s, leaving the low-income earners desperately searching for shelter.

It was at this time that the general public began to notice, forcing the government into action to help the homeless.

Welfare

The Nixon era ushered in a restructuring of the welfare state that has been continued by all subsequent Republican and Democratic administrations. Driven by ideological commitments to privatization and decentralizing welfare to states and localities, the erosion of public welfare took many forms, but two changes stood out in terms of the 1980s crisis.

The first of these was deinstitutionalization, a plan to empty the asylums treating and housing mentally-disabled individuals, which was promoted by both civil libertarians and cost-conscious policy makers. In the two decades after 1950, the inmate population of national state and county psychiatric institutions was reduced from over 1 million, to just over 100,000. The plan was that deinstitutionalized people would be served by community mental health centers funded by the federal government, but these never materialized in sufficient numbers to address the growing needs. The promise of deinstitutionalization remained unfulfilled. Many former patients ended up on the sidewalks of America, homeless and without care. Today, many of them are in county jails, where they have been joined by people who would have been institutionalized in previous eras.

The second key event was the cut in welfare. Nationwide, between 1982 and 1985, federal programs targeted to the poor were reduced by \$57 billion. Because of adjustments to the eligibility requirements, over half the working families on federal aid were removed from welfare. There was little comfort for families who sought help at the state level, where many states had cut their assistance payments in half, with some states lacking such programs altogether. In post-Proposition 13 California, welfare payments were effectively cut by repeatedly eliminating cost-of-living adjustments, including Medi-Cal coverage. Health and mental health funding were cut as well, along with funding for substance abuse treatment, forcing the homeless to live on public sidewalks.

Vulnerabilities

Later on, during the 1980s and 1990s, additional factors worked to increase personal vulnerability and expose more people to the risk of homelessness. One was the explosion of crack cocaine usage that created an epidemic of drug abuse and addiction, and unraveled the lives of countless people who became caught up in the drug market either as users, suppliers, or distributors. Later, other drugs such as methamphetamines became widespread and were no less destructive to human lives. While demand for treatment and care of addicts skyrocketed, the number of public treatment facilities drastically fell across the country.

At this time, attitudes toward criminal justice turned away from rehabilitation to punishment. The rise of stricter sentencing and three-strikes laws dramatically increased the number of incarcerated people, causing the prison population to triple, rapidly worsening the trends for California. The

result was a growing population of ex-offenders with little or no rehabilitation or job prospects.

Lastly, the rising cost of health care and rapid growth of the uninsured population meant that many people with medical problems had no recourse for affordable health care. People often faced a choice between paying for health care or for housing, and as a result frequently found themselves homeless.

The decline in personal incomes and the squeeze on affordable housing, along with rising rates of personal vulnerability, created, in America, a broad class of precariously-housed families and individuals who were only a paycheck or two away from eviction. With diminishing prospects of help from cash-starved public welfare agencies, many people lived on the edge, knowing that one more personal setback would precipitate a crisis that could cause the descent into homelessness.

It was this situation that caused April and her mom to live on the edge of poverty. Since April was born out of wedlock, she accepted her status since she was not aware of any other family condition. When she questioned her mom about her dad, she was brushed off with one or another excuse. She never got to meet or know her dad.

THE UNFORTUNATE

“Can I get you something, Mama?” April asked her mother who, like most days, came home, took off her dated coat, threw it carelessly into the corner next to the entrance, and, on unsteady legs, headed in the direction of the bedroom. She could have just hung the coat on the hooked board mounted to the wall next to the door, but that would have been an added chore to a person under physical strain.

“Don’t bother me, child,” she replied between coughs and puffs from a crumpled cigarette clutched between her lips.

It saddened the child to watch her mom in agony day in and day out, suffering from what doctors would describe as withdrawal symptoms. “I wish I could help you,” the child muttered, lost on deaf ears. She lingered by the bedroom door as usual, hoping Mom would emerge to join her company, but, as usual, this was wishful thinking.

The child retreated into the only other room in the apartment, the living room. Propped on the sofa, she scanned channels for a children’s program on the small-screen television. Luckily, PBS televised Sesame Street, her favorite show. It always perked up her mood, but not enough to be happy and cheery. Where other children would laugh, expressing emotions while watching a program, the gesture of a loud laugh did not come naturally living in the drab shadows in San Francisco’s Mission District. The Mission was her world, a world filled with misery and poverty. While she saw the city swept clean by municipal workers in other areas, the Mission District appeared to be neglected. She, too, would rather be strolling along Pier 39, watching the impatient sea lions barking for food. She could relate to that, as hungry as she was most days.

The very thought saddened her even more. Only on rare occasions did her mom take her to the piers, usually on a holiday to beg for money. It was always a happy time, standing next to Mom, holding out her little hand while watching a visitor rummage through pockets or purse to hand over a few coins. “Thank you,” she would reply while her mom sat smoking on the bench nearby. “Look,” she would proudly proclaim, “Quarter,” while handing the meager alms over. It usually earned her a casual shrug of the shoulders but otherwise did not seem to produce an emotion in her mom.

The child stood patiently waiting for the next handout while taking in the beautiful scene near the bay. Four hours later, her mom stood up, indicating she had enough earned for the day. It was a good thing because hunger pangs emanated from the child’s stomach. Pangs were nothing new. As a matter of

fact, she was used to it. Most days she would anxiously wait for Mom to come home carrying a bag containing a piece of bread or some fruit someone discarded in a trash can near the park.

While her mom would sometimes make a measly earning on a day job, most days she came home empty handed. “Where is the money?” the child would unhappily demand, realizing it would be another hungry evening, night, and next day, but she was used to it. Food, to her, seemed a luxury. When hunger took over her body it also affected her mind. Her thoughts began to drift for something to do. Unfortunately, living in a small, cramped one-bedroom apartment amidst other apartment dwellers did not leave much space in the living room for recreation and decoration. When she looked around the room, there was only one space of interest: the bedroom. She headed there as quietly as possible so as not to wake up Mom. Her hands reached for the only treasure, placed on the top shelf, hoping Mom had left the box unlocked. Like many times before, today was no different; it was locked. “Maybe someday,” she said in the quiet of the room. She had yet to find out its contents.

Hours passed before she was shaken from the TV. “April!” the voice shouted from the bedroom.

It stirred the child into action, and she urgently rushed for the bedroom. “What, Mama?”

“Bring me the bottle,” Mom demanded.

As usual, there was an opened bottle of whiskey or other distilled grain waiting in the cupboard below the sink. April rushed to retrieve the bottle. Her mom had no patience and would get angry at her if the bottle was empty or slow at being delivered. It still puzzled her why her mom would drink such ghastly brew. One day she stole a sip from the bottle to taste it but cried out in pain, thinking her mouth and throat were on fire. It would be the only time she would ever try an opened bottle again. Just the thought of it brought on repulsion.

April was too young to realize that her mom was addicted to alcohol and smoking pot. Her mom was not the only one with these habits. Other people living in the neighborhood displayed the same habits. For this time, those were the accepted practices by many of the poor in the country. Ecstasy was just emerging and hard drugs had not yet spread to the general population. Sure, people were aware of drug addictions, but those were isolated cases mostly practiced by frustrated artisans and entertainers who had fallen prey to heroin, a hard-core substance leading, ultimately, to a life cut short.

In the limited sphere of April's existence, at her age, her immediate neighborhood was the only world she knew. It was a world of struggle for a meager existence carved out by the poor and desolate, forsaken into lifelong poverty created by society. There were the wealthy blessed by the inheritance of an industrial revolution, thrifty shop owners with a sense of diligence catering to their neighboring customers, skilled workers holding part-time jobs awaiting the next technological revolution, and professionals making a living at various laboratories and hospitals, with the rest watching the dwindling of the American Dream. Once the essence of prosperity, the good old days were far from April's concerns. Hers was a struggle for survival repeated each day from waking to sleep, a life created by her mom through prevalent conditions in a city subjected to economic changes.

"April," her mom's voice reverberated from the bedroom, "get me another bottle."

"Uh-oh," she muttered, knowing that it would cause trouble. Rushing to the cupboard did not solve the problem. There was no bottle left. What made it worse was that she had no money to quickly fetch another at the liquor store down the street. Rummaging through her mom's purse did not raise enough cash for the purchase. She had to face her mom. On wavering strides, she opened the door and went in, only to see her mom sprawled across the bed and, as usual, puffing away. "Sorry, Mom." She whimpered. "No bottles left."

"Then go and get some," her mom shouted.

"But, Mama, there is no money." This brought silence but only for a few seconds.

"Go begging. Now!" Mom ordered. "And don't come back empty handed."

April knew the routine. As much as she disliked crouching by the sidewalk holding out her tiny hand, watching passing pedestrians sneering at her, it was an order with which she had to comply. Depending on the day of the week and sidewalk traffic, when luck was on her side it would be minutes, or it could take hours to accumulate enough coins to buy the bottle. It was her responsibility. It was her job, the only one she knew aside from homework. Homework for April was not the ordinary schoolwork assigned daily to the students. Homework for her was much like a slave that used to be hired by a rancher. It meant getting up at dawn's early light, preparing breakfast for Mom with whatever stale bread and spread was left in the cupboard, washing whatever clothing was tossed into the hamper, doing the dishes, making their

beds, cleaning rooms, vacuuming floors, shaking out rugs when the weather was nice, and taking a shower to clean her own body.

“What about school and homework?” one might ask.

School was not considered an important task by her mom. Most days April skipped school. Though it reflected on her grades at the end of the school year, her mom did not seem to care much, so neither did she. Many children her age living in the inner city missed a day or more. Teachers were used to it and so were the parents. Education was not that important. “What do you need to be educated for?” grownups would reflect when the subject came up. “There are no jobs anyway.”

The country had just emerged from a decade of riots and cultural clashes that were not yet over. These grossly affected the economy, stagnant to begin with, which mostly affected the poor. For April, it was nothing new. She was born into it and did not know anything else. Sure, grownups talked about better days and reminisced on more glorious times, but that was an era she did not know and couldn't imagine.

Reading for her was still difficult and so was carrying on a conversation, things necessary for a productive life and meaningful career, but to acquire both she had to go to school. She did not know the importance, a responsibility usually instilled by parents.

And so, this morning, she hurriedly trotted down the street to a nearby store front, a grocery she knew would be the best spot for today's emergency. Despondently, crouching on her haunches with her head facing the ground, she waited. It helped, avoiding eye contact with people passing by. To her, they were all strangers. She had picked up the trade from grownup beggars. This encouraged passing pedestrians to stop and drop a coin or two into the cup clutched between her hands. As time passed by, her mind usually wandered from the immediate chore. Even though her education was close to nothing she was street smart, a trait much more suitable for her position. Today, her mind played out images about people she did not know.

First and foremost, images of a dad appeared in her mind like so many times before. Though not real, it was an image she had made up years ago after asking her mom about her dad, but all she learned was that he was a Bum and No-good Bastard not living up to his promises. Her mom had had plans to get married, coming from a family having kids, but he had skipped out on the day of the wedding. He just did not show up at the church, standing up family and friends, who waited patiently for an hour before the ceremony was adjourned by the priest.

Today, this early morning, April lucked out. The stars or whatever spirit was guiding her miserable life had mercy on her. She earned enough money for a cheap bottle of whiskey, loaf of bread, carton of milk and a quarter pound of cheese, the daily essential items for the two. Money to buy meat was a rare occasion, usually reserved for the holidays when people were more apt to feel sorry for the poor.

Back home, her mom had been waiting for her to reappear. “What took you so long?” were words thrown at her entrance.

“Sorry, Mama, but I have good news,” April announced with a victorious smile. “Look.” She handed over the grocery bag.

It pacified her mom.

Ten minutes later April was alone once more for the day. She never knew where her mom went or what she was doing at the places April was not allowed. For the most part, she had no idea about her mom’s activities, but there were times she would sneak along at a distance to find out. It appeared that her mom knew quite a few people not far off, with whom she would meet. It was mostly neatly-dressed men apparently from a better level of society. She envied her mom for it but did not dare to reveal her stealthy presence on her scouting. Her spying on Mom would reveal times when her mom and a stranger would drive off in a posh vehicle to places unknown. At other times they would walk to a nearby hotel only to reappear an hour or so later, departing with a hug accompanied by words too far off for her to hear.

What April did not know at the time was that her mom was earning a living, not by ideal means, but a living nevertheless. Unfortunately, she never learned how much her mom was earning. It was a secret never revealed. It was money the two could have used to live in comfort, but it was squandered daily by her mom on booze and drugs, essential necessities for facing repeat customers and new clients with each day.

Her mom was enslaved in a cycle of alcohol and drug use not easily broken. A victim of society, like most users, April’s mother’s use had begun gradually with an initial sample handed out at no charge at a party. Unbeknownst to most adolescents, it’s to get one hooked by a dealer. At that age, a dealer is not a hard-core user and pusher. It likely is a popular school pal, making an earning beyond that usual for a boy his age. The sampling quickly turns into a habit. Daily school routines become bearable with occasional stops to the restroom to replenish the habit. Life turns into pleasure but things don’t remain this way. Drugs have a means of sneaking up on one’s wellbeing, slowly at first, then gradually taking over the innocent’s being,

directing and enslaving every waking moment and ending in eventual premature death. A life cut short by overdosing on heavy drugs or a chemically-poisoned substance concocted in some illegal laboratory.

It was a state April's mom had not yet reached, but eventually she would be consumed by and succumb to it unless a rehab clinic got their hands on her first. It was an unfortunate destiny April might face as well, brought on by an adult who had an opportunity at a potentially productive life turned immoral.

“What's wrong with drugs and alcohol use?” the question may be asked. “They've been around for centuries.”

“It's immoral,” the logical response should be, but is generally not the case. They provide a service and way of living to the pusher and grower. Somebody other than the user always benefits. Drugs and prostitution have followed man for thousands of years. They will follow man into the future and into space as well. Most prevalent in wartime situations, the provider of sex meets the needy male in all sorts of situations and levels of society.

For April, though used to the meager living her mom provided, it was good enough since she did not know any different. Unfortunately, the city's educational system thought otherwise. With her frequent absences and missing classes, the law finally caught up. Child services was instructed to take action that would take April from her mom and put her up in foster care until she reached the age of sixteen. Where she was terrified at the very thought of being torn from her mom, the only person she knew, Mom, on the other hand, seemed somewhat relieved from the burden of caring for her child shifting to the city's social system.

PART TWO CALIFORNIA '80s

A HOMELESS CULTURE

April, at age ten, knew today was the day Child Services would come and take her away. It was not a comforting thought after the stories her mom had told her. As she was too young to effectively comprehend, these stories had projected images on her mind more like a horror story than a fairytale. Having just awoken from a troublesome sleep, April saw it was still dark outside. Darkness did not scare her much since she was used to begging into the night. What scared her more was the clinical environment of an institution she was about to face. The thought sickened her so much it forced her into making a decision. So as not to disturb Mom still sleeping, she quietly entered the bedroom, rummaged through the space they had lived in for the past ten years, and found that, aside from adult clothes, there was not much left.

Next, she inspected the closet. Straining to reach the upper shelf, her hand touched on a solid object beneath some hats her mom had used to wear. Pulling it down, she saw it was a small wooden box people use to save valuable items. Clutching the box under one arm, April took one of her mom's belts from the closet hook and hurried for the exit. On the way out of the bedroom she grabbed the blanket and pillow from her bed and pushed the door shut. The blanket and pillow would prove to be two valuable items in the years ahead. On unsteady legs she stood in the darkness of the hallway, taking in a few deep breaths that calmed her jittery nerves, thinking what would be ahead.

For her, it would mean begging from morning to evening, hoping to earn enough for another day's livelihood. She was jolted from her troublesome thoughts by the sound of the doorbell. April was devastated and shouted, "Mom!"

"What?" the voice came from the bedroom.

Trembling in the dark hallway, April ignored the bell but seconds later it was followed by a repeated knocking. "Please go away," she whispered.

Both knew the day had come to vacate the apartment but they refused to open the door despite multiple shouts from the outside: "Police! Open up."

April hastily retreated into the bedroom to be by the side of her mom. They had hoped to get another reprieve when things suddenly quieted down for a minute, but they were jolted into reality when the landlord and police stepped into the room in which they were hiding. They had forced their way into the building with the landlord's passkey. The eviction process did not take long. It

was over in minutes. The only things April and her mom were allowed to take were the only suitcase in their possession and what they could carry.

Fortunately, April was allowed to remain with her mom since Mom still had personal connections with some city officials, who, after some pleading, extended both their liberty to move freely with a promise from her mom to move into a shelter. But these promises proved to be empty. Both would spend most nights tucked under a blanket listening to the quiet of night while watching the starry sky overhead until both succumbed to restless dreaming.

Two years had passed since they lost their home. At age twelve, April had learned the cruelty of life. Ever since, they had been on the move from shelter to shelter and, when all were filled at the end of the day, they moved on to city parks, hoping for her mom to find a bench to rest on for the night while April slept on the bare ground, covered by frayed blankets to keep rain, frost, and fog off of their haggard bodies.

Their life of begging, as it had turned out, was tolerable for most of the year, but when the winter months set in, it could become miserable even in a relatively temperate city such as San Francisco. Until now, April had never experienced the cold of winter. She had never touched or played in snow. The city was located near ocean currents drifting up from the equator, which influenced the ambient temperatures in the region. Aside from the nightly fog, the climate held steady through the year. It might have snowed at some time in the past but, for April, she had not yet experienced it.

“Mama,” April would ask the first few months they were homeless, “why can’t we get another apartment?”

“Can’t afford it,” would be her ready reply. “Everything is getting too expensive here.”

It was a chilling revelation. Not only did it mean a life permanently deprived of a permanent dwelling, but it could mean moving from the city into the country where things would be more affordable. It was the competition against other homeless who were less impoverished, fending for a spot on a storefront or hallway that, unfortunately, kept increasing by the numbers with each month.

Even the homeless had a code of conduct. They were judged by their immediate environment and the number of belongings piled into a shopping cart. A tent was not an easy acquisition, but it elevated one from living on bare ground into a semi-permanent dwelling. It was a sought-out commodity April and her mom had not acquired yet, and were consequently forced to

move on to another empty spot, which were becoming scarcer with each year. It was a constant migration for the poorest of the poor to stake out their next living space. No matter how much they tried to protect an acquired space, the male species still dominated the homeless. On the brink of starving, April would witness her mom disappear with some homeless man, to return with a few dollars she'd earned. For April, it was a gesture of mercy by the individual, or so she reasoned.

Ever since her mom had developed pneumonia a few months ago, they had been penniless for the most part. People kept their distance from anyone having such an affliction, visible mostly due to the constant coughing up of mucus in-between uncontrollable hacking spells. This also held true with her mom's personal customers, who had avoided close contact at first, then broke connections altogether, denying them their only source of income.

They were both subjected to these stringent but survivable conditions until the day her mom would not wake up. Not knowing what steps to take next, April cried out to a nearby homeless person who had enough sense to wave down a passing patrol car. When the ambulance arrived, April knew she would be alone from here on.

Several days later, her mom was cremated, with her ashes contained within a modest urn, handed over to April for safekeeping. The only item she inherited from her mom was the wooden box, once filled with bracelets, necklaces, jewels and trinkets, now empty. Poverty stricken to the extreme after her mom's illness, since every valuable item her mom had owned had been turned in at the pawnshop, April only had the urn to remind her of her mom. Although her mom had not been the best child caretaker, April treasured the urn with fond memories. She had been a mom, the only living relative April had had. For a child who had lived a sheltered life, the current environment was the only condition she knew. Everything else was hearsay and susceptible to dreams and imagination.

From here on, April had to fend for herself. In a way, she was relieved of the one responsibility she knew, taking care of her mom, but it did not lift her spirits. She was penniless without shelter, facing an uncertain future.

SAN FRANCISCO – ‘90s

It all began in the early ‘90s, with local governments throughout the nation desiring some of the \$3 billion dollars appropriated to the budget the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) annually spent on homeless services. To get a better account on future budgeting, cities were to count the unhoused and unsheltered population. Shelters usually full to the bursting with waitlists hundreds to thousands of applicants long, and county health or human services agencies, in addition to nonprofit organizations burdened by the task, often resorted to the simplest method of enumeration known. Organizers and citizen volunteers went into the night with flashlights, clipboards, and pencils and literally counted heads they located curled-up on sidewalks, in tents, and in RVs.

How many people were assessed using this method only came close to be an educated estimation. True numbers were not available and counted data could only be estimated into 500,000 homeless throughout the States, with approximately 8,000 homeless people residing in San Francisco alone.

Investigative agencies among homeless experts explained that census figures collected when using untrained volunteers in the dark were inaccurate and flawed and probably an under-exaggeration. Whenever one asked, “How many homeless people are there?” one could take the official number and, depending on city location and size, add thirty to fifty and perhaps one hundred percent more. Anyone who spent some time in San Francisco or Oakland gained a painful awareness that the region’s homeless problem had evolved from being a novelty in the ‘80s, attracting tourists, to an international embarrassment, and, of late, into a humanitarian crisis.

Not localized to only the Bay Area, similar situations also evolved in Los Angeles and Orange County as well. Tents on streets or poor people living in RVs, with human misery filling in the landscape of wealth and human prosperity. It had become a California-wide concern and did not stop there.

“What are the causes for such trends?” local citizens and visitors would ask. It could easily be explained with the following rationale: too high of rent, a lack of affordable housing, an increase in prosperity for the work force, and incurring affluence for the already wealthy. According to San Francisco city consensus, “For every person escaping homelessness, three more people take their space.”

Blaming all of it on California or Californians would be a wrong assumption. The U.S. once had a national, federally-funded budget for the destitute under then-president Ronald Reagan. Today, homelessness has

become particularly bad in California because housing prices and the cost of living are out of proportion, primarily due to restrictive growth and zoning laws. If anybody could afford to pay \$1 million for a 950-square-foot bungalow in Palo Alto, it was only the Silicon Valley wealthy.

It may come as a surprise to the nation and the rest of the world, but a recent poll taken by the state proves one point: California was “Okay with all of this.”

It could be because the state has become liberal under its prevalent democratic sentiment or because the citizens of the state are accepting the homeless situation without penitence. The homeless are here to stay.

Where the homeless at one time had been regarded as impoverished individuals void of opportunities, today, in the fast-paced world we live in, though reluctantly in most cases, homelessness has become an emerging culture accepted and tolerated by citizens and neighbors.

THE MISSION

For April, more time had passed, and she'd grown from a child into puberty. Crouched on her haunches by necessity, as she had done for most of her life, she watched seagulls drifting in and out of her sight. As was the case on sunny days in San Francisco, she would spend most of the day at her favorite spot on Pier 39.

The morning chilled her body so she wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. "Cozy," she muttered, embracing the warming effects of the wool. Being left to her own demise after her mom's death, she was subject to fending for herself. At first, she struggled to find daily food and shelter. But over time, being the street smart girl she was, she adjusted to a life of permanent homelessness, mostly played out on the open, absorbing daytime sun with starry skies at night, thinking of her mom and a better life.

"Now what?" her mind prodded after waking up to a new day, bringing the lonesome child into the present. Reality set in once more. "Where should I go?" These were the two most important questions in her life. Having grown up within a limited and defined space, there was only one answer: "The Mission." She headed there.

The Mission, in today's world, her world now, was one of San Francisco's poorer sections, extending out from Market Street, the city's prosperous business district. The transition from one sector to the next became obvious after crossing Van Ness Avenue.

The Mission was a district April could relate with. She and her mom would seek out dinner here when there was money left. Lunches were always quick snack items bought at a grocery store near the apartment. While the Mission today had degraded into a poverty-prone part of the city, it had a rich heritage of which most dwellers were unaware.

The Mission District, commonly known as "The Mission," is a neighborhood in San Francisco, California, originally known as "The Mission Lands," meaning the lands belonging to the sixth Alta California mission, Mission San Francisco de Asis. This mission, San Francisco's oldest standing building, is located in the northwest area of the neighborhood.

The Mission is often warmer and sunnier than other parts of San Francisco. The microclimates of San Francisco create a system by which each neighborhood can have different weather at any given time, although this phenomenon tends to be less pronounced during the winter months. The Mission's geographical location insulates it from the fog and wind from the

western part of the city. This climatic phenomenon becomes apparent to visitors who walk downhill from 24th Street in the west on foggy days towards Mission Street in the east.

Prior to the arrival of Spanish missionaries, the area which now includes the Mission District was inhabited by the Ohlone people, who populated much of the San Francisco Bay area. Spanish missionaries arrived in the area during the late 18th century. Franciscan friars were reported to have used Ohlone slave labor to complete the mission in 1791.

Around 1900, the Mission District was still one of San Francisco's least densely populated areas, with most of the inhabitants being white families from the working class and lower middle class who lived in single-family houses and two-family flats. Development and settlement intensified after the 1906 earthquake, as many displaced businesses and residents moved into the area, making Mission Street a major commercial thoroughfare. In 1926, the Polish community of San Francisco converted a church at 22nd and Shotwell Street and opened its doors as the Polish Club of San Francisco, referred to today as the "Dom Polski," or Polish Home.

The Irish American community made its mark on the area during this time, with notable residents such as etymologist Peter Tamony calling the Mission home. During the 1940-1960s, a large number of Mexican immigrants moved into the area—displaced from an earlier "Mexican Barrio" located on Rincon Hill in order to create the western landing of the Bay Bridge—initiating white flight, giving the Mission a heavily Chicano/Latino character for which it continues to be known today.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicano/Latino population in the western part of the Mission declined somewhat and more middle-class young people moved in, including gay and lesbian people (alongside the existing LGBTQ Latino population).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the neighborhood received a higher influx of immigrants and refugees from Central America, South America, the Middle East and even the Philippines and former Yugoslavia as people fled civil wars and political instability at the time. These immigrants brought in many Central American banks and companies, establishing branches, offices, and regional headquarters on Mission Street.

From the late 1990s through the 2010s, and especially during the dot-com boom, young urban professionals moved into the area. It is widely believed that their movement initiated gentrification, raising rent and housing prices. A number of Latino American middle-class families, as well as artists, moved to

the Outer Mission area, or out of the city entirely to the suburbs of the East Bay and South Bay areas.

However, in 2008 the Mission still had a reputation of being artist-friendly. The Mission remains the cultural nexus and epicenter of San Francisco's Mexican/Chicano and, to a lesser extent, the Bay Area's Nicaraguan, Salvadoran and Guatemalan communities.

EMERGING APRIL

When April emerged from puberty into adulthood, homelessness was on an increase through parts of the City. Still sparse in the early '90s, isolated cases were seen at popular spots along Market Street but were still considered more of a vagrancy trend. Beggars and drifters made their appearances. Crime in the city was almost nonexistent even though tourism had been on the increase during the past decade. Not even petty theft, usually targeted at the tourist, existed. This elevated the city of San Francisco into the nation's most popular tourist spot. For the time being, beggars were considered a novelty to vacationers and treated without prejudice. Most people handed over donations to the seemingly destitute who quickly became part of the city's culture, and over time this attracted more and more destitute.

It was not until mental institutions were permanently closed by the state that homelessness took possession of many sidewalks and, as a result, became a stigma for local dwellers. This influx caused a shift from the inner city to suburban developments in the southern, northern and eastern parts of the Bay.

For April, the first few days were difficult while she explored her new neighborhood. Looking at the Mission District from her new vantage point of being homeless, her life took on a new turn. Whereas in the past years it used to be the place to shop and dine inexpensively compared to most other parts of the city, it had now become the place for survival with three objectives: eating, sleeping, and keeping clean. Since she had no obligations anymore, such as tending to her mom when she was alive, there was plenty of time in a day to explore.

The most pressing item on her mind was locating a restroom facility. This did not present much of a problem since there were many restaurants in the area. All she had to do was walk into the place, head for the toilet, splash some water on her face, run her fingers through her unkempt hair, and exit. It was that simple. Nobody bothered her. She was just another patron in a hurry. This would become the first routine in her daily personal regiment. Eating was a bit more involved. Since she was penniless, begging would be required. Having many years' experience in that skill, the only one she had acquired, all that was required was for her to seek out an ideal spot with an abundance of foot traffic. It proved to be an effortless solution to set up temporary camp with her miserly belongings. Camp, in April's vocabulary at this time, was one pillow and blanket bundled around her mom's urn, folded into a cushion to sit on.

Since there was hardly any competition, begging for a day's eating expense was accomplished within a couple of hours if she was at the right spot. It did not take long for her to realize that she lacked a number of personal items she'd have to acquire. There was the need for a comb, hygienic pads, a toothbrush and toothpaste. That was all she could think of this first day, looking over the counter in the pharmacy she was standing in, waiting for the cashier to ring up her items.

Finding a sleeping space turned out to be more of a challenge. Asking around the neighborhood, she could not get any information about a homeless shelter. There were none since homelessness had not yet been common. The only option was a flophouse or an inn, both scarce in this part of the city since much of the population were families living in single homes.

She ended her search by tossing her package next to a row of hedges on a quiet street, hoping to get a few hours of sleep. Sleep did not come easy that first night, wrapped in her blanket in the open. She did not care. The scene was too spectacular. "My god," she muttered. "What have I been missing?"

Being mostly residential, the Mission became quiet as soon as the last restaurants closed at midnight. Though there were lights to illuminate the streets, it was nothing like in the city. It was dark enough to reveal a completely new world to April: the overhead starry sky. Overwhelmed by such beauty, "Splendor," she thought, was an understatement. "It's more like brilliance." Like many people looking into a night sky, she was overcome by the sheer beauty of the Milky Way with its bountiful cosmic display. Though silence and the infinite were embracing her vision, a new experience was cutting across her vision: shooting stars.

She laid there for hours in a restful state without worrying about sleep. It was a new world to enjoy.

Shaken from a wonderful world of dreams early in the morning, April felt something prodding her body. "Must have fallen asleep," she muttered, turning on her back. Looking straight up, expecting a starry sky, she found it had become daytime. She was staring into the questioning eyes of a uniformed officer, peering down at her and demanding, "Police. Get up. This is not a public park."

Somewhat surprised at the rude awakening, she stammered, "Sorry, officer. Won't happen again." Jumping to her feet, she quickly gathered her belongings and was about to leave.

“Not so fast, lady,” he said, stern faced, taking hold of her arm. “What are you doing here?”

Still drowsy from sleep and not quick to respond, she hesitatingly explained, “I was watching the sky and must have fallen asleep,” hoping he would let her go. But he didn’t.

“How old are you, anyway?” he asked, assessing her.

“I’m twelve.”

“You should be home with your mom. Where do you live?”

“In the city,” she said in a wavering voice. It must have triggered a sense of alertness in the uniformed law officer.

“Okay,” the officer replied. “Let’s go.” He promptly took her to the police station a few blocks away. After arriving, trying to get more information from her proved ineffective. All he could get from her was, “I don’t know.” The result was April getting fingerprinted and cited with a warning. “Don’t stay out at night. You could get in trouble.”

Though it was a sincere warning to a young girl who appeared innocent, at the moment trouble was the least of her worries. Prying further would not reveal any information at the station and, since there was no crime committed other than a city ordinance infraction, they let her go.

“Better find some sleeping quarters,” she muttered. “But where?” Since it was still early in the day, she had plenty of time to find some suitable place, she hoped. With her belongings slung over one shoulder she marched on, up one street, down the next. Since it was spring time, not having sleeping accommodations did not worry her much. She had enough confidence in herself to secure a place before the cold set in, many months away.

“Room for rent,” a sign proclaimed, posted on a door. April suspected what money was in her pocket might not be enough for a night, but had to find out the cost of the room. “Six dollars a night,” she was told by the woman who lived in the apartment. “Why, you are so young. How old are you? You’re not a runaway or in trouble?” the woman prodded.

“Thirteen,” she lied, not feeling guilty despite only being a few weeks short of twelve. “How much a week?” April needed an idea for how much money she had to beg.

“\$42, but I’ll let you have it for \$40 if you stay longer.

“Okay, I’ll take it,” she said. “I’ll be back later.”

“Wait,” the woman brusquely demanded. “I’ll need it now or I can’t hold the room.”

“I’ll take the chance,” April replied. “Don’t have it now.” She could sense the woman’s change in mood at the empty promise and assured her once more, “I’ll be back,” then turned on her heels and walked off. Two things were gnawing at her: her stomach and where to go to work. She could still not grasp the fact that she was penniless and bound to be a beggar. Referring to her trade as work at least gave her a sense of direction into the future, whatever it may hold. She sought out a promising store front to start with.

She soon found out that people in this part of town were not apt to easily part with their hard-earned money, even if it were only a few pennies. As always when begging, her mind wandered to fill the emptiness in her life. Tears came into her eyes as she thought about her mom. Though sharing a poverty-stricken life, taking care of her mom had not been an ideal situation, but it was her mom’s company she so dearly missed. “Mom,” silently, she pleaded, “why did you have to die?”

Born into an empty life without much education, she had never learned to pray. There was no heaven and salvation in her mind because most of her brain was empty space, yet to be filled with knowledge. She realized her shortcomings when listening to people talk. There were many words she did not understand, and she could not grasp the meaning of the exchange. In the case of April and her mom, she’d mostly learned orders and commands. “Another thing I have to learn,” she thought, watching people huddle together while talking, “how to converse.”

It was already getting late in the afternoon and she had not earned enough to pay for the room. As it’d turned out, it had been a long and not-rewarding day for her. The coins she’d earned were hardly enough to buy a hamburger and fries, her favorite treat. At least she could satisfy her hunger pangs for the day. Eating only one meal a day was nothing new for April. No matter what the night might hold in store for her, sitting by the window at the local McDonalds, watching passersby rushing home after a day at work, she completely enjoyed the special treat.

Two hours she lingered at the place. It was getting dark and her need to find a place for the night was pressing. “But first,” she thought, and promptly headed for the toilet. Checking herself over in the mirror, she saw there was the need to wash her body, hair, and find a change of clothes, but that had to wait for another day. For now, she squeezed some soap from the container, turned on the water faucet, washed her hair using the soap, and scrubbed her face, neck and upper body as much as the space allowed. Drying up under the blower, she exited into the cooling air with her bundle slung over one

shoulder. “Guess the park will have to do,” she decided, heading in the direction she had passed earlier in the day, hoping it would not attract the police again.

Cuddled under a tree within the warmth of her pillow and blanket, she enjoyed another night in splendor, observing the starry sky. While a life without social responsibilities had not yet entered her innocence, in the recesses of her mind she knew that living under the stars would be her destiny, if there was a means where she would not be pestered by the police. She could not tear her eyes from the grandeur of the night.

April was surprised at the bustling traffic on the street as soon as she opened her eyes. She had slept many hours and felt invigorated. Despite facing another day in uncertainty, at the moment she did not care. She was ready to explore her new world. She had to seek out and move on to a different section of town if she wanted to earn some money. Applying for a job was impossible because of her being underage. Child labor had been banned in this country decades ago. She suddenly realized her predicament. “I’m enslaved into begging forever.” It urged her into action, at least for the moment.

Striding onto the sidewalk along the street once more, after some time her eyes caught a familiar building in the distance. Speeding up her stride, minutes later she confronted the entrance of the popular supermarket, Safeway. She decided to make it her spot for the day. Several hours into the day, she realized that it had paid off. She was dollars ahead. “Now we are talking,” she said out loud, delighted at the earnings. It was the most she had earned in a long time. It gave her a sense of power she had not previously felt. She’d had to turn over her earnings to her mom in the past, but now it was hers, all hers. She was elated and called it quits for the day, deciding to be back the next day.

Trotting her way back, she hoped the room from the previous day was still available. Elated by the “Room for Rent” sign still up, she rang the doorbell.

“It’s you again,” the woman declared, somewhat surprised, checking April over. “What happened to you yesterday?”

“I was visiting some friends. It was getting too late and I stayed over.” It may have been a lie but to her it was a necessity; fabricating an excuse had become a way of life. It was better than outright lying. She always felt guilty, but not with an explainable excuse. “But today I’m ready to rent the room,” she declared.

“You have the money?”

“I’ll pay for a week. Is that okay?”

“It’s your money, as long as you can pay. You ready to move in?”

April handed the woman the \$40 and received the key. “One week?”

“One week. It’s what we agreed.”

“Thanks,” she said, following the woman down the hallway.

“That all you have?” the woman said, checking her into the room.

“For now,” April said.

The woman left a joyful April to take possession of the room. Upon inspection, the place was clean and spacious enough for one person. For the first time in weeks she was content, but not for long. After it turned dark, she realized there was one thing missing: the starry sky. Disappointed, she realized she’d made a big mistake by being enclosed within four walls. It troubled her to the point of questioning her decision. “It’s only one week,” she placated herself. It turned out to be a long week for her. She could not wait to get it over with. In the meantime, she returned to the supermarket daily, earning more money than she had expected, until the day uniformed security showed up, demanding, “Get out of here. Go away. This is no place for beggars.” She was promptly led away from the premises.

Her windfall sadly ended. She had to seek out a new place to earn a living. While she had longed to sleep in the open again, her joy was clouded over for a couple of nights when it rained. Having not considered such a possibility, she had to re-evaluate her lifestyle. “I know,” she came to the conclusion, “I’ll compromise.”

The word ‘compromise’ was not part of April’s vocabulary, but she understood what it meant. It had been readily used by her mom. The thought of her mom clouded April’s mind once again. She dearly wished for her presence, or anybody’s presence. “Strange,” she muttered after realizing that she had not yet made a single friend, and she wondered what it would take. Sadly, she already knew the answer. People keep their distance from beggars. She was destined for a life in solitude.

In the loneliness of night, she contemplated, many times, her present and how she could fit into society. Unfortunately, there was no solution unless somebody would be willing to guide and educate her so she could get a job. But that seemed out of her reach since everybody she met was in a hurry, tossing a few coins into her hand only to rush off. She realized it would be a despairing life, feeling hopeless and trapped without an end in sight. “There is always hope,” she pacified herself, and would have prayed if she knew how.

Consequently, days went by, then weeks, followed by months when she sadly realized nothing had changed in her life. The cold had settled in at the end of the year without any change for her in sight. The year following was a repeat and, before she knew it, another year had passed with her living under the sky. From the initial monetary windfall she had experienced that first week, she contemplated, “How long has it been?” That turned out to be the exception for her earnings.

And so, it appeared, one day felt like the next and the next, while time marched on. It seemed that there was no chance for April to change direction or improve on her life. What made it worse was her frequent run-ins with the law. It was always the same. In the darkness of night a uniformed shadow would appear out of nowhere while April was asleep, prod her in the back with the tip of a boot, and demand an ID only to drag April to the precinct and book her, followed with being locked up for the night then released the following morning. Not having committed a crime, there were no charges other than an ordinance violation¹ to justify spending one night in jail.

The unfortunate thing for April was that she felt trapped in a lifecycle beyond her control. No matter how hard she tried, she could not figure out a solution to her dilemma. It would be a struggle without an end, living in poverty. More time had passed by her when she realized another birthday was only days away. She would be fifteen years old without having anybody to celebrate with.

UNION SQUARE

At age 15, April was cautious with strangers but experienced a new sensation and the knowledge that came with it. Contemplating the reason, she remembered something her mom would say: “Be careful of men when you grow up.” When April asked for the reason, her mom’s reply would be brisk and secretive. “All they want is to get in your pants.” The first time she’d heard the expression it did not make much sense. *Why would a boy or man want to wear my pants?* Having grown up, she knew better now. There were other times when she questioned the insanity of life. After waking up one morning, she felt wet. Thinking she had wet her pants, she checked, but was shocked when her hand came up bloody. She let out a scream. “Mama!” But there was no answer. Still drowsy from sleep, upon spotting the urn, she was reminded that Mom had passed years before. Frightened beyond comprehension, she tried to run away from herself, leaving the mess behind.

Not realizing how long she had run and how far she had come, exhausted and breathless, she collapsed on the sidewalk sobbing. It was not long after when a voice entered her senses. “What’s the matter, girl?”

She realized then that a woman was crouching beside her, gently stroking her hair. “Who did that to you?” the woman demanded with a stern gesture at April’s legs. The running had aggravated her plight with even more blood trickling along her skinny legs down to her feet.

“I don’t know. I was asleep and woke up bloody.”

“Come.” The woman beckoned her to a nearby park bench. “I will explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Your mess. You see,” she began, “there comes a time in every girl’s life when her body goes through changes. Didn’t your mom tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

The woman believed the girl’s ignorance as April stared back at her through innocent eyes.

“You are becoming a woman,” she explained while April patiently sat on the bench next to her, somewhat calmed by her soothing voice. “Don’t be frightened about the blood. It’ll happen to you each month.”

“Every month! Why?” It was still inconceivable to April to have such a frightening experience once, but every month? “For how long?”

“Many years. For as long as you are healthy and can bear children.”

“Children? I don’t want kids.” The thought alone made her shiver. She could not imagine how and why she would ever want to bring a child into this

world, a world filled with pain and misery.

It was a reflection instilled by her mom who had always complained about April being born. “You are the reason I have to prostitute myself.”

Back then it did not make much sense to April to be accused of something that was not her fault. Her sense of reality dictated that Mom must have been wrong about some things but she could do nothing about that. Though Mom was the only person she depended and relied on, April respected her for raising her as best as she could within the means she had. April did not feel guilty about it since her mom was the one that spent all of their earnings.

“Let’s get some ice cream,” the woman suggested. While April normally would have refused such offer from a stranger, today it was a welcome gesture. Ten minutes later they entered an ice cream shop, a rare occasion for April.

“Can I have one of those?” She pointed at a fruit shake picture on the counter. She was thirsty and had always wanted to try one of those big drinks she’d watched people order. When asking her mom, the answer was always, “Not healthy for you.”

While April openly respected her mom in everything she did and was told, at times she did question the adult’s wisdom. “Other people do it.”

“Other people are stupid. They believe everything they read and hear.”

“I believe you,” April objected.

“I know best. Besides, you don’t read.”

“I can read,” April protested. The problem she had with the language was with spelling from a lack of writing.

“I’m talking about books.”

“Not my fault,” she stated. “We never have money to buy any.” That would end their verbal exchange. Short comments like this was the extent of their conversations. No matter how much she would beg growing up, her mom never read to her from a storybook or made up a fairytale like other moms did. The consequences were visible. She grew up into a stern and questioning person. Recollecting her mother and daughter relationship, she could never remember having a happy and joyful moment. Nobody ever heard her laugh.

It was minutes later before April became aware again of her company. “Sorry,” she said. “My mind was on my mom.”

“Where is your mom?”

“She died a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” she managed to say, almost in tears. Her mom was strict with her most of the time, but she still loved her. She was the only person in her life that had shared the limited and restricted space of her world. April and the woman spent another hour at the park before the woman finally bade her goodbye.

“I have to go now,” she said. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ve managed so far,” April promised. “Thank you for explaining the facts of life.”

The woman turned and was out of her sight seconds later. It was here when April realized how much she missed talking with people. It was a trait she’d never expected or wanted before. “You can’t trust anybody,” her mom would say. This laid the ground rule for her future life. April returned to the place she had slept the previous night. Expecting her pillow, blanket, and—

“Mom’s Urn!” she yelled out in anguish, as she found the spot empty. Thinking she had made a mistake in location, she stood there a minute, recollecting last night’s events. Theft was not an option to consider. The destitute might be a poor and deprived lot but they live within a strict code of honor. They were honest people. That was what turned them to a life of poverty to begin with, getting away from a society mostly out for material gain.

Feeling dejected about having lost her items, especially the urn, which was irreplaceable, she decided to relocate to a more promising place. The Mission had become a part of the past, she decided.

“Time to move on,” she said to herself. It was not her choice, but due to the conditions she’d found herself in lately. She’d had too many run-ins with the police to come up with constant excuses for illegally sleeping out in open parks, private properties, backyards, doorways, and other less clean places. There was one thing she would never give up, sleeping under the sky, no matter how often she would have to move. Watching day turn into night was the only entertainment she could call her own. It was the only treasure, though distant and out of reach, with which she was left. Relocating would be easy without any objects to carry but the challenge was where she would go.

Moving on empty handed may sound like an easy task, but ask anybody: it takes preparation time, if only mentally. From a realistic point of view, it is dependent on the things one owns within the acquired comfort zone. From a psychological perspective, some will always resist. Today, it was April’s second turn to face reality. There was one place she remembered where her

mom had taken her. It was a better district than the Mission, not only for affluence but, more importantly, it was within the city and close to people and traffic, the two necessities for a beggar to effectively survive.²

And that's what she did, turning her back on the Mission and heading straight for Union Square. At the pace she was walking it would take her only a couple of hours, in time for the evening crowd. Her path was direct and pretty level as she strode along Van Ness Avenue, taking a right turn on Geary Boulevard, and four blocks later she arrived at her destination.

"Wow." She had not expected this many people at the park. "I'm home," she muttered, happy with her choice of location. While Union Square³ was a well-known landmark among tourists, it was also the place to go for local and visiting shoppers alike. "I'm gonna like it here." It might have been an easy spot to fall in love with, but making it a living quarters for April proved to be a new challenge.

Only a few years earlier, around the time she had become homeless, the city center had been a leisurely-paced area, but the environment since had drastically changed. Trolleys stopped almost constantly from both directions, dislodging their loads. People of all languages, it seemed, were targeting the Square for their personal pleasures. The first thing April did after arriving was seek out a place to rest in the park.

Swiftly stepping up the spacious stairways built to enter the square from every direction, she arrived on top of the platform topped with palm trees, exotic shrubs, and other trees in a setting much like a tropical garden. It was exhilarating just to be here at this unexpected metropolitan paradise. The square might have been a local attraction only a few years earlier, but today, seated on a comfortable, clean bench, April found a peace of mind she had never experienced before.

To others nearby she might have looked just like any other visitor enjoying the day. Not burdened with pillow, blanket, and urn... "The Urn," she silently cried out, wondering again why she had lost the precious item.

It took some minutes to calm her nerves. In her feeble state of mind she had already taken possession of the bench and did not want to lose the spot, silently replacing the lost urn with the bench. It was the first time she thought in terms like that and would claim this very spot tonight and in the nights ahead. Somewhat calmed, her physical needs took over. She had to seek out a public toilet facility. She lucked out. There was not only one restroom nearby, but several to accommodate the influx of daily visitors.

On entering she could see the cleanliness of the well kept up facility. It was pure pleasure for April and her free spirited lifestyle to have access to it. She made ready use of it, not only to cleanse her body but to also wash and comb her tousled hair. Luckily, she'd had the foresight to keep her intimate belongings in one of her inner zipped-up jacket pockets. It reminded her of something she had been meaning to do. "It's time to get another jacket." She'd realized some time ago that she had outgrown the well-worn overcoat someone had given her years ago. All she had to do was earn enough to purchase another at one of the many nearby clothing outlets. It would not present a problem. As was the case with most cities, there was always the Salvation Army in addition to Goodwill stores.

Feeling clean and invigorated, April took an exit from the public restroom but halted after a few steps. "Where to?" The answer came in the form of a rumbling stomach. Undecided on what direction to take, she spotted a display case at one end of the Square and headed for it. As expected, her eyes captured a city map showing the immediate district she was presently in. Aside from projecting local streets and alleys, it also listed shops and restaurants in the area. "But first," her mind prompted her, "I need money." Penniless like most mornings, she headed in the most likely direction toward the BART Powell Station.

She remembered her mom's advice from years ago: "You'll always find some eateries near BART." She proved to be right. Every street April entered was a goldmine for the stomach. All she needed was money that she didn't have at the moment, leaving her with two choices: go begging now, or wait until evening when shops and restaurants closed. Looking herself over, the first choice was out of the question. With the loss of her trademark as a beggar, the soiled pillow and blanket, nobody would take her seriously begging for money. The problem was that she was famished now. She did not want to wait many hours to satisfy her hunger.

A thought came to her mind. "Why not?" She headed for the most likely spots, sidewalk restaurants and cafes. Since it was already lunchtime it would be easy pickings, as she had done on numerous times before, living by the motto, "Where there's a need there's a solution." In practicality, the process went like this: enter the shop and beg at the counter for a leftover, or snatch a plate when the waitress was preoccupied, or grab some leftover morsel from an eater that had just left the store. It was this simple but did not always go as smoothly as expected. There was always a do-gooder or well-meaning citizen calling for the attendant, reporting the misdeed she had just committed. When

caught, after she explained that she was homeless and famished, the business owner usually just released her and let her go.

Today's plan went as smoothly as she'd expected. In the flurry of eaters, nobody paid her any attention when she took a piece of bread and some cheese, along a half-empty cup of soda, off a table a patron had just vacated. Seconds later she was on her way, munching on the easily-acquired sandwich and sipping her way back to the Square, happy with the involuntary decision forced onto her at the Mission. "Life's good. Think I'll stay."

Her next needs, getting a pillow and blanket, turned out to be more of a challenge. Like earlier, she trotted back to the display case. "There it is," she muttered, her eyes homing in on the Salvation Army⁴ depot located not far off. She spotted the place after a ten-minute walk and briskly entered. Stopped by the desk clerk, she explained her situation to the attendant. "I'm homeless and just arrived this morning." It was enough information, after signing in, to gain her access to the place.

To a homeless person, the place was much like a candy store to a child. All one had to do was select the item dearly needed. Today it was a pillow and blanket. Nothing more, nothing less. This was the trademark she had decided on years ago. Any more would burden her freedom of movement, any less would expose her to the elements. Today she lucked out. Looking around the store, her eyes caught additional items such as racks of clothing that seemed to be plentiful. She asked the clerk if she could exchange her well-worn overcoat for one that would fit. "Of course," was the ready reply. Since it was so easy, she asked for grownup clothes as well since she had outgrown her shirts and jeans. There was even a personal dressing room to try on the clothes.

"A place to remember," she thought on the way out, with a promise to the custodian to attend the weekly sermons⁵ the Salvation Army offered, feeling slightly guilty since she was not a religious person. It was an empty promise. With her shopping over, a new bundle slung over her shoulder, April felt exuberant. Energized once again, the previous night was all but forgotten. Today would be a new chapter in her life, that of a grown-up woman.

ADULT APRIL

April, clad in new attire, felt like a newborn open to adventure. Until now, her life had been nothing but a struggle for survival. Not only had she transformed, but the environment had changed as well. Returning to the spot she had arrived at in the morning, she sought out her bench once more. Slightly saddened, she realized that it was occupied and took a seat on the containment barrier encircling the Square. With feet propped onto the bundle of new clothes, she waited for her bench to be free. In her mind she had already taken possession while watching the local scene. In contrast to the Mission, her life played out completely differently. People were rushing from one place to another as soon as they stepped from a trolley.

Though free to move at any moment she still felt somewhat restricted from just getting up and leaving her place because of the bundle. Not knowing anybody to watch her things, for fear of losing it, she had to take it everywhere she went. It presented a problem with most places around the Square. Identified as vagrant as soon as she stepped into a store, most places would not permit her entrance, saying, "We don't want your kind here."

Banned entry was nothing new to April, but with so many places geared for shoppers, though she rarely spent money other than for personal necessities, given the opportunity she was curious. Safekeeping her effects was an issue she still had to solve but, at the moment, no solution came to her mind. Watching people enter and depart the Square, she was able to reclaim her bench. The couple that had occupied it had just left.

Though happy with her relocation, wholly content for the moment, she felt her day had been unproductive. She realized the cause. She had not spent the time begging.

"I'll make up for it tomorrow," she decided and remained withdrawn in thought. "What is this?" she pondered after an idea encroached on her mind. She could not erase the thought. It kept popping up despite her discounting it. It was an element she had never considered in the past. "No," she shouted silently. "I could never do it."

The thought that kept entering her mind was something she had pushed from her life years ago. It would be the ultimate challenge, rejoining society. For her, living in an organized society ended with her mom's death. Ever since, her life had been driven solely by survival from one day to the next. Though difficult at first, once she had figured out the trade and how to avoid the law it had become routine. It became her lifestyle, a life free from obligations.

Like many vagrants before her, it was a situation brought on by some unfortunate event. Until homelessness became a trend, there usually had been some external force and justifiable reason for it. In most cases living in destitution was not a voluntary act; it was forced onto the individual. One had to learn to live with it day and night through all seasons.

Seated on her comfortable bench, April considered the alternative but disbanded the thought for one reason: "I could not and would not live confined by four walls." It brought a shudder to her body, thinking about her earlier life with her mom. Returning to the same living conditions would be intolerable now. She needed the freedom of being beneath the stars. While submitting to a life of sustained deprivation, it was complete freedom from obligation she and some other homeless people sought out.

There were other reasons as well. She realized that in order to survive in a modern society, food production was of foremost importance. The task force for preparing the ever-increasing demand came from an army of dedicated citizens much like her. There were many other services as well, demanding just as much devotion. There were occasions when she'd wondered and asked herself, "What could I do?"

She did not know because she'd never learned a trade nor was she guided by her mom or in public schools to the responsibilities of contributing to society. Most people have an instinct for duties inherited from parents but, in her case, the discipline was missing. Unaware of the consequences, she grew up without a sense of self preservation. Directed by her mom, it was always, "April, get me this or get me that," without her ever explaining the reasons. April grew up much like a slave.

For now, having settled on Union Square, April was relatively content. The begging was easier than in her past. She learned that the location was perfect. Not demanding much at her age, whatever she earned in a day was adequate to support her lifestyle. Spending mostly the coins, she was able to save the bills handed to her. It was a new experience supplemented by a feeling of prosperity. Because of it, she was able to purchase items she had never tried or tasted. "Life is good," she decided, with a promise to make the Square her home.

Unfortunately, prosperity did not last for her. Disaster came in the form of the law. Sleeping under the stars each night, in the eyes of the public she was viewed as a vagrant. Sooner or later someone will report the person. That's what happened to her. Gaining competence and feeling comfortable at the Square, earning more than she ever had, she became complacent. Staking

claim of the bench, her nightly home, must have upset someone, because late one evening she had a visitor. Like many times before, it was a uniformed officer demanding her ID. Since she had never acquired one, she knew the penalties only too well: getting booked with one night in jail and an added police record in the local precinct. It was nothing new and did not bother her much at first, but after repeated visits by the law, she had to consider moving on. At least she'd had a good run for almost a year.

What April did not anticipate but became aware of was the influx of other beggars encroaching on her territory. Annoyed at first, she became concerned at the growing competition. Though begging was a trait with an open season for all, it severely impacted her earnings. Suddenly, she was forced to fend for herself. Her savings were rapidly dwindling. With the law bearing down on her almost nightly and having to deal with competition during the daytime, she was forced to explore new territories.

At first, because it was within easy walking distance, she headed for Market Street. Spending her first day on the sidewalk begging for a few hours, she decided it was sufficient for an evening meal. Her living expenses and demands were minimal and at the moment did not greatly impact her present life, but things were about to change.

Market Street, the hub of San Francisco for Fortune-500 corporate headquarters, was bustling with commerce. People generally arrived on location by 9:00 am. After spending eight hours in an office with one hour reserved for lunch, they would depart the office by 6:00 pm, five days a week. A different crowd arrived on weekends. It was vacationers on Saturdays and families from the peninsula on Sundays. It was mostly those the beggars depended on. Enthusiastic and happy from being in the nation's number one tourist city, people readily supported the vagrants.

Changes to vagrancy were about to take place. It began innocently enough over a couple of years. At first, the jobless musicians appeared, trying to earn a living by playing an instrument, generally a flute, trumpet, or harmonica, easy items to carry. Next were magicians and jugglers displaying their skills, quickly followed by palm readers and story tellers. Powell Street Station became the focal point for open entertainment. Visitors and performers alike were enthusiastic for the opportunity to perform, a situation readily tolerated by the city council. It appeared that the problem with vagrancy was solved. Unfortunately, happiness was mostly a front for the daytime display and to earn money. The real reason was a means to sustain individual lives after the dark that followed.

April's first journey here was a joyous one. Being entertained was a new pleasure for her. It was something she could live with and decided to relocate from Union Square. Although there was ready competition for begging, it was acceptable because of the pleasure the location provided. The first night did not prove much of a problem as she bunked on Powell Station grounds. The weather was warm with the night cooling to a comfortable temperature if one had a blanket. What was important was that she continued to sleep under the stars. She was not the only homeless. Others shared her space. She had her entertainment for the day with the sound of musical instruments lulling her into the world of sleep and dreams. She became oblivious to what went on around her and in neighboring alleys.

April awoke early the next morning with sun rays warming her face. Propping up on her elbow, she assessed her situation. With an approving nod, she cheered, "Going to be a beautiful day," and rolled up her blanket and pillow into a bundle as she did each morning. The present location could not have been more ideal. Right away she spotted the prominent sign located at the restroom facility next to the BART subway entrance. On entering a just-vacated ladies restroom, April arrived prepared with soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, as well as with her comb and hairbrush. She spent some leisurely time grooming herself.

Thirty minutes later she stepped outside feeling fresh and invigorated to face what looked like another promising day. She decided to check out the immediate neighborhood. About to cross the sidewalk in the direction of Ellis Street, headed for the Mason District, her immediate goal, she collided with a young man on a bicycle rushing to beat the traffic light. Her clash with him was easier than the young man's fall. While she was cushioned by her bundle of clothes, he landed on the concrete, scraping up knees and elbows.

Angered at first at the unexpected collision, after examining his bloody knees, he apologized to her. Her anger immediately turned to compassion.

"You're hurt," she declared, bending down to him, still sprawled on the street. Reaching out, her hand grabbed him by the arm, helping him on his feet.

"Nothing a bandage can't heal," he replied with a forced smile, inspecting his elbows.

The bicycle did not escape the collision undamaged. The front wheel was bent. He would not be able to continue riding the bike. From here on out it was walking until he had it fixed.

“What are you going to do?” April said, casually inspecting him. *Young, good looking, inches taller than her, neatly dressed beneath a blond set of hair; nice,* she decided, reaching for the set of fashion shades laying in the gutter that he had dropped.

“Don’t know at the moment,” he said, taking back the shades. “Get the bike fixed, I guess.” It was here when he took notice of her. Much like her, he was measuring her presence and offered, “You visiting?”

“The blanket and pillow,” she acknowledged with an ardent smile.

The recognition was mutual when he offered his hand. “I’m Eric. What’s your name?”

“April,” she responded with hesitation, questioning if giving out her name was a wise decision. Trouble always followed, usually with the law.

“How about a latte?” he suggested with an inviting smile.

“What about the bike?”

“I’ll take care of it right now,” he said, unclipping the front wheel from the frame.

“That easy,” she said, marveling at the mechanics. She had never paid much attention to transportation designs. To her, it had always been something others owned.

“Nothing to it,” he said, leading. While she was burdened with her bundle, he was with carrying the front wheel slung over one shoulder, and with the other hand clutching the frame. His focus was a Starbucks one block over on Market & 4th Streets.

It was only a couple of minutes’ walk. Seated comfortably inside while keeping an eye on his dismantled bike leaning against the outdoor bike rack through the window, he prodded, “You must be visiting. It’s not easy to find an affordable place in this city. Right?”

April, it being her first encounter with the opposite sex, considered an excuse but quickly changed her mind. Sooner or later, most likely sooner, he would find out her true status anyway. Consequently, she decided on telling him the truth while watching his response. “I’m homeless.”

“What a coincidence,” he said, his face set in a broad grin. “So am I.”

“What?” She did not believe his words. “You don’t look even close to being a homeless.”

“It’s true,” he repeated. “I’m homeless. Been here for over a year. How about you?”

“I was born and grew up here.”

“You must be kidding,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Homeless aren’t born here.”

“This one is,” she emphasized by taking a sip from the latte.

HOMELESS TOGETHER

After the initial revelation and surprise Eric had laid on her, April was still watchful about him. She had grown cautious over the years living fancy free in a homeless world mostly populated by men. She had yet to meet a homeless woman. In her mind, he was only being friendly to get what most men want from a woman, sex and gratification like her mom had warned: “All they want is to get in your pants.”

“I may not appear like the typical homeless,” he volunteered, “but I am. You see, I live this way by choice. I choose this lifestyle.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. Other than herself, it was the first time anybody else had ever stated so. Still doubtful, she tested him. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not,” he fired back at her. “Why would I lie to you? I don’t even know you. I am an honorable person looking for adventure.”

“Everybody lies,” she replied, shaking her head. She remained silent. Her thoughts wandered back to living with her mom, a life prone to cheating and lying. Acquired through their environment, those were two traits she had learned early on in life, enforced by her mom: “It’s a means of self-preservation.”

“What does preservation mean?” she had asked.

“To protect yourself,” her mom replied with an all-encompassing wisdom. From that moment on, it became April’s gospel to protect her belongings and secrets at all cost, as modest as they were. At this time, she had not acquired a homeless person’s mode of mobility, a shopping cart. All her miserly possessions were wrapped up in a small bundle she could easily carry and protect. It was her choice. It gave her the mobility she desired where others, in possession of a shopping cart, were in constant fear of losing their belongings to others.

April savored her latte to its last drop, “This is great,” she admitted. “Never had it before.”

“Want a refill?”

“No. I better get going. Have to earn money,” she explained with a smile. He paid the bill on the way out while she took the time to watch the cashier adding up the total, questioning if she could perform the function. “No,” she decided. It would mean giving up her freedom.

“Now what?” Eric said on the way out, looking over the damages.

“Guess you’ll have to get bandaged up and get the bike fixed.”

“Why don’t you come with me?” he offered. “We can talk on the way.”

“I don’t follow strangers.” It was a strict rule, her rule she had decided when mom had died. Rumors were always circulating about some poor person disappearing. Maybe they were legitimate rumors, or they might have only been conjecture, but the facts were never known because nobody ever returned.

“I’m not a stranger anymore. You know my name.”

“I don’t want to get hurt. There are evil people in the world.”

“I know, but this city is safe. What shelter are you in?” Eric asked, genuinely interested.

“None,” April replied. “I don’t like shelters. They have rules.” As usual, she was short with words. She had learned early on in life that the fewer words she used, the more discouraged anybody would be from prying further. Besides, skipping most of her classes did not help with her limited vocabulary range. “I sleep out in the open.”

“You are homeless,” he admitted with a grin.

“Told you already.”

“Come.” Eric gestured for her to follow.

“Where’re we going?”

“I know a place you’ll like.”

They walked along Market Street headed towards the piers. Three blocks later they passed Montgomery Station. “This is where I usually hang out,” he said with a gesture towards the square. Much like Powell Station, the place was filled with entertainers earning money.

“Why here?”

“It’s closer to where we are going.” Walking three more blocks brought them to the Ferry building at the Embarcadero. April had never been here and, stepping out on the docks, she realized why it could be one’s favorite spot. The view was breathtaking. She’d had no real idea of how large the bay actually was. It extended all the way to Sausalito in one direction and Oakland in the other. In wonder, her eyes scanned the panorama reaching from Golden Gate Bridge in the west to the Bay Bridge east with Alcatraz and Angel Islands in-between and ships traversing the view.

Pulling his bike along by the frame, Eric headed straight for the Ferry landing’s edge, stating, “My favorite spot.”

“I can see why,” she admitted. “It is pretty. But what about the bike?” She could not imagine him dragging the damaged bike along the rest of the day.

“I’ll fix it later,” he explained.

Her interest piqued. “How can you fix the wheel? It’s all warped.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have the tools.”

They sat for hours talking, with him mostly explaining and her interrupting to clarify. It did not take her long to realize that he was pretty bright. She also learned that he was born and raised in Iowa by affluent parents, and had been sent to Yale for his education, where he dropped out after the second semester. “All I could think of was California: ocean, sunshine and surfing.” he explained. “So I landed in L.A.”

“What brought you to San Francisco?”

“Ten years surfing at Laguna Beach was enough. I wanted to see the rest of the country. What attracted me here were cultural places I’ve heard of.”

“And?”

“Silicon Valley. I might try to land a job there one of these days.”

“Then,” she contemplated, “you’re not actually homeless.”

“Yes, I am. I need the freedom and flexibility just like you and every other homeless. If I can land a job that provides flex hours without an office environment, I might consider it.”

“What about school, the training for a job? Doesn’t it require great knowledge?”

“Not for me,” he assured her. “I can pick up any trade and profession without them.”

“Are you a genius?” She was genuinely impressed. To her it was unthinkable to ever meet anyone with that kind of intelligence.

“If you want to call it that, with an IQ of 165.”

“What’s an IQ?” She’d never heard of that and felt completely inadequate, especially when he shot a quick glance at her.

“The scale to measure people’s knowledge capacity.” From here, Eric spent a lot of time explaining things to her, but did not seem to mind. He must have realized that she had qualities of her own. For one, her practical approach to things. “Why don’t you talk while I fix the wheel.”

She looked at him, dumbfounded. “Here? What about tools?”

“Got them right here,” he said, pulling a couple of items from the saddle pouch.

“Can I watch?”

“Suit yourself.”

She sat quietly while watching him straighten out one spoke at a time using tiny wrenches, wondering if there was anything he did not know. “What about your family?” he asked while diligently at work.

“My mom died a few years ago. I never knew my dad. I’ve been alone and homeless ever since.”

“Tragic,” he admitted with a hint of compassion. “That drove you into homelessness?”

“That, and the begging Mom taught me.”

“Sorry,” he said, genuinely regretful. As expert as he was, it still took close to an hour to adjust the wheel to perfection, but the tire was still flat. He pulled out another couple of tools. “Miniature irons,” he explained while April watched, again impressed at his skills as he removed the valve and pried the tire from its rim. A quick patch slapped on the leak, tube and tire mounted back on the rim, air pumped into the tube, and the bike was fixed.

“You are a genius.”

“This,” he said with a gesture at the job just finished, “is called knowhow, practical skills applied.”

“I want to learn,” she said, hoping he would stay with her. In only a few hours she had become so impressed and enchanted with him she wanted to know more. *I am such a fool*, she thought, recalling her excuses for skipping classes. “Can you teach me?”

“It depends,” he said, leaving it up to her.

“Depends on what?”

“Whether you have the patience.”

“Patience is not my problem,” she said, then explained. “I spend most of the day daydreaming without a goal. My problem is trusting people.”

“I’m not just anybody,” he assured her. “My word is my honor.”

“I’m happy to hear that. What do you have in mind?”

“I’d like to learn how and where you spend the day.”

“Really?” she expressed in astonishment.

He was slightly surprised at her response. He briskly got up and patted the headlamp, talking to the bike like it was a horse. “Today, you’ll get a break.” He walked, with April keeping pace.

Striding north on Embarcadero they cut west at Pier 33 onto Bay Street. An hour later, they arrived at “My Place,” as Eric called Russian Hill. She could already guess why he had selected this prime real estate spot. Arriving at the top, she could see forever. The 360-panoramic sight was spectacular. Looking out west, the Pacific horizon appeared like a mirror with a blue sky merging into an limitless ocean.

“Wow,” she exhaled, taking in all of the beauty. “Where have I been?”

“I thought you’d like it here.”

It was then that she spotted a few tents staked to the ground against one end of the hill. He headed for the one with the best view, parked the bike, and invited her into the tent. “Here we are. My abode.”

“You must really like your space,” she said, admiring the size of the tent.

“Don’t we all,” he replied with a grin.

“Well, yeah,” she admitted. “But not everybody has the money for a tent this size.” There were even a couple of folding chairs propped against one side. “A TV?”

“I get bored at night only watching the stars,” he admitted.

“I thought freedom provided all that.”

“A bit of entertainment doesn’t hurt, especially with the new channel networks.”

“You mean cable?”

“Yes, cable.”

“I’ve heard of it but never watched any.” She stepped outside to absorb more of the view while he rummaged around the place. The sun was just setting. She put on her overcoat to keep away the evening chill. San Francisco might be warm during the day, but after sunset the air turned chilly. The reason why many people were attracted to this city was its temperate climate. With fog drifting in from the ocean most nights, people even turned on their heaters at home, but as soon as the sun came up, it did not take long for the temperature to warm the day.

Thirty minutes later Eric joined her. “You feel up to a party?”

“A party here?”

“Not here. A friend’s home. We are invited.”

“I’ve never been to a party.”

“You must be joking.”

“I’m serious.”

“Parties are the things to do in this day and age.”

She only took a second to reply. “Of course I want to go. What time?”

He checked his watch and said, “We’ll leave in a couple of hours.”

“What can I expect?” she asked, anxiously anticipating the event.

“Nothing but fun,” he said. “You’ll see.”

“What should I wear?” she said with heightened excitement.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” he said, looking her over. “You can’t go like this.”

“Why not?”

“You look like a homeless.”

“But I am a homeless.”

“Yeah. But you don’t want to advertise it. Not while you’re with me.”

“You’re ashamed of me?” She threw him a defiant look. “I won’t go.”

“People will snob you. They’ll avoid you.”

“I don’t care,” she said with finality.

“Look,” Eric reasoned with her. “On your own you can do whatever you like, but while in my company I want you to look pretty.”

“I’m not pretty.”

“Are you kidding?” Not believing her he shook his head. “You are a pretty girl. All we have to do is fix you up a little.”

“What do you mean, fixing up?”

“You know. A little makeup.”

“I don’t wear makeup.”

“We’ll see. Let’s go.”

“I thought we’d leave later.”

“Come.” He beckoned her along. “I’ll take you to a couple of places first.”

“What about my things?”

“Leave them in the tent.”

He led her down the hill towards North Beach. North Point Street was only a six-block walk where all the shops were. It was the busiest area in the city. Tourists sought the place out not only for souvenirs, but attire as well. Passing a hair salon, he pulled her to the entrance. “Let’s stop here.”

April resisted. “I won’t feel comfortable in there.”

“Why not?”

“People don’t look real. They all look artificial.”

“It’s the trend with parties. You’ll see.” Eric practically had to pull her into the salon, where they headed for the counter. Despite April’s disheveled appearance the attendant was very courteous. “How can I help you?”

“Can you do something about her hair and face?” Eric said with a gesture at April.

The attendant led her to a vacant chair. “Make yourself comfortable,” she said, and disappeared. Seconds later she emerged with a hairstylist and makeup artist. Both went to work on April, who just sat in the spacious chair not completely understanding what was transpiring. She felt her hair getting washed, dried, pulled and clipped, fingernails being cut and painted, and final touches of makeup being applied to her face.

The entire process took less than an hour while she caught brief peeks at her face, her chair being swiveled in all directions. Once finished, she was spun to face the mirror straight on. Mesmerized by the person staring back, all she could stammer was, “Who am I?”

Eric was standing by her side in admiration. “You’ll be the prettiest girl at the party.” He paid the bill and off they were to the next stop. It turned out to be several shops, one after the other, trying on an assortment of different dresses. “I like this one” or “that’s definitely you,” he would comment as she exited the dressing room.

The end result was enforced with his comment: “You look stunning.”

“I never knew what that meant,” she commented and did not mind his eyes caressing her body. He realized that she had the potential for having a well-toned body, but did not comment on her figure. It would require working out at the gym, an activity she was probably ignorant of, he suspected. For the time being, on the way to the party, he was extremely supportive of the way she had turned out. Money well spent. People would definitely take note of her, and they did the second they entered the party room. Room was an understatement. It was more like a hall, filled with dozens of party seekers.

“And who is this fine lady?” the host asked Eric. They had been friends ever since he had landed in the city.

“Somebody I picked up this morning,” Eric offered. “Actually, she picked me up off the ground after colliding with my bike.”

“Anybody get hurt?” the host asked, checking them both over for scrapes.

“Only the bike and a few skin scrapes,” Eric said with a concerned look at April. “Did you?”

“Not a scratch,” she said with a smile.

“Come,” the host invited her along, “I’ll introduce you to my friends.” He then turned to Eric. “You go fix her a drink.”

“I don’t drink,” April, embarrassed at the attention, shouted after Eric, who turned and came back.

“What are you saying?” He seemed surprised, and rightly so. Who in his right mind would turn down an offer like a drink? Definitely not a homeless. He was about to object but kept quiet. He realized April’s innocence and would not have appreciated additional attractions beyond what she had already endured. He remembered her reaction after giving her body earlier a once over.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Not here.”

“Then,” he prodded, “what can I get you?”

“A bottle of water,” she said.

It brought a grin to his face, suggesting he knew what she was up to. “Ecstasy?”

That was what all the parties were about. This was an era when Ecstasy was the most desired drug on the market, with hardly anyone not being a user, especially the young and the party crowd. While he cherished the thought, she had no clue, but was about to find out.

It did not take long before she was approached by a fashionably-dressed woman with an open hand, asking, “How many?”

April started to count the pills, but was interrupted by the woman. “How many do you want?”

Eric was nearby and overheard their exchange. He quickly rushed to her rescue. “I’ll take care of it.” She watched as he exchanged money for several pills, putting most of them in his pocket. “Here,” he said with an invitational smile. “Take one.”

“What is it?”

“Come on,” he said, slightly taken aback at her displaying such ignorance. “Ecstasy,” he insisted. “It’s what everybody here wants.”

“I’m sorry,” she pleaded, accompanied by a genuine innocence in her eyes. “I don’t know.”

It suddenly dawned on him that she really did not know. It explained the reactions she’d displayed during the day, not only once, but several times during their conversations. He had shrugged it off as shyness on her part, but it all made sense now. He did not know whether to be happy or sad about meeting her. On the one hand, he appreciated her innocence but, on the other, he wondered if he had the patience to educate her. “We’ll see,” he muttered. His words were drowned by the increase in sound coming from the DJ booth. To Eric, the setting would have been complete if April would have been willing to try the substance.

“I thought the water bottle was for the pills.” His assumption went unheard. She had turned towards the exit door, ready to depart. He was highly disappointed at her spoiling a fun evening and rushed after her. “Wait. Let me explain.” He pulled her into a quiet corner to enlighten her about what the party was all about. “You see...” He talked while she listened.

Partying was the pulse of the city. Everybody came to town on weekends to celebrate. People arrived from the South Bay, the Tri-valley, Oakland, and as far as Stockton and Sacramento. On any given weekend night, dozens of parties were held at various halls rented for the occasion. They were not just

privately-held parties; they were organized affairs sanctioned by the city and tolerated by the law. At other times police cruisers would flag you down for a sobriety test, but in San Francisco this was not the case, due to the reasons stated by the host. “We don’t sell alcohol.”

“What about people staggering in and out of the place?”

“They bring their own booze but most come here to experience the drug effects. It’s the pulse of the party.”

“What drug?”

“Ecstasy.”

What Ecstasy did to the body was dry it up, forcing a person to consistently drink water. It suited everybody just fine. Then one might ask, “How did a host cover for the expenses of the party?”

“By charging anywhere from \$5 on up,” was the answer, people soon learned. The result was a relatively inexpensive evening out when considering the cost of a drink at a bar or club. As for the cost of Ecstasy, it might have been the most inexpensive drug ever on the marketplace, even though one pill only provided a high for a couple of hours. That was the reason why people bought several pills throughout the evening and night. An Ecstasy party usually lasted into the morning hours, with sexual benefits dished out in private spaces and rooms reserved for these pleasures.

April was finally educated about the pleasures of drugs and sex when Eric insisted, “You’ve got to try some. You’ll be bored otherwise.”

“I don’t know.” She wavered. “How does it feel?”

There’s still hope, Eric thought. At least she’s interested. Handing her a colored pill, he insisted, “Take one. Try it. It won’t hurt. You won’t be sorry.”

Observing other guests being happy and having fun, laughing and swaying with the rhythms of in-vogue soundtracks, April said, “What the hell,” and popped one, though reluctantly.

Unaware about what to expect after taking the pill, April was handed off by Eric to several of his friends while he enjoyed the lively party activities himself. She was slowly losing the anxiety she had felt all day since meeting Eric. The world he had introduced to her, a world of personal risks and emotions, took ten minutes for the drug to take effect, opening a door to a world April had never anticipated would exist.

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Notes

[←1]

Ordinance violations used to be enforced in those days, but in today's world of a homeless culture, an ordinance will only be acted on by authorities if a crime is committed.

[←2]

There are other terms for beggar. There is the drifter, panhandler, vagabond, penniless, indigent, and more, but for April at this time it was beggar.

[←3]

Union Square is a 2.6-acre public plaza bordered by Geary, Powell, Post and Stockton Streets in downtown San Francisco, California. “Union Square” also refers to the central shopping, hotel, and theater district that surrounds the plaza for several blocks.

[←4]

The Salvation Army is well known for its network of thrift stores or charity shops, which raise money for its rehabilitation programs by selling donated used items such as clothing, housewares, and toys. Clothing collected by Salvation Army stores that is not sold on location is often sold wholesale on the global second-hand clothing market.

[←5]

In addition, the Salvation Army is a Protestant Christian church and an international charitable organization, reporting a worldwide membership of over 1.7 million, consisting of soldiers, officers, and adherents collectively known as Salvationists. Its founders sought to bring salvation to the poor, destitute, and hungry by meeting both their “physical and spiritual needs.”