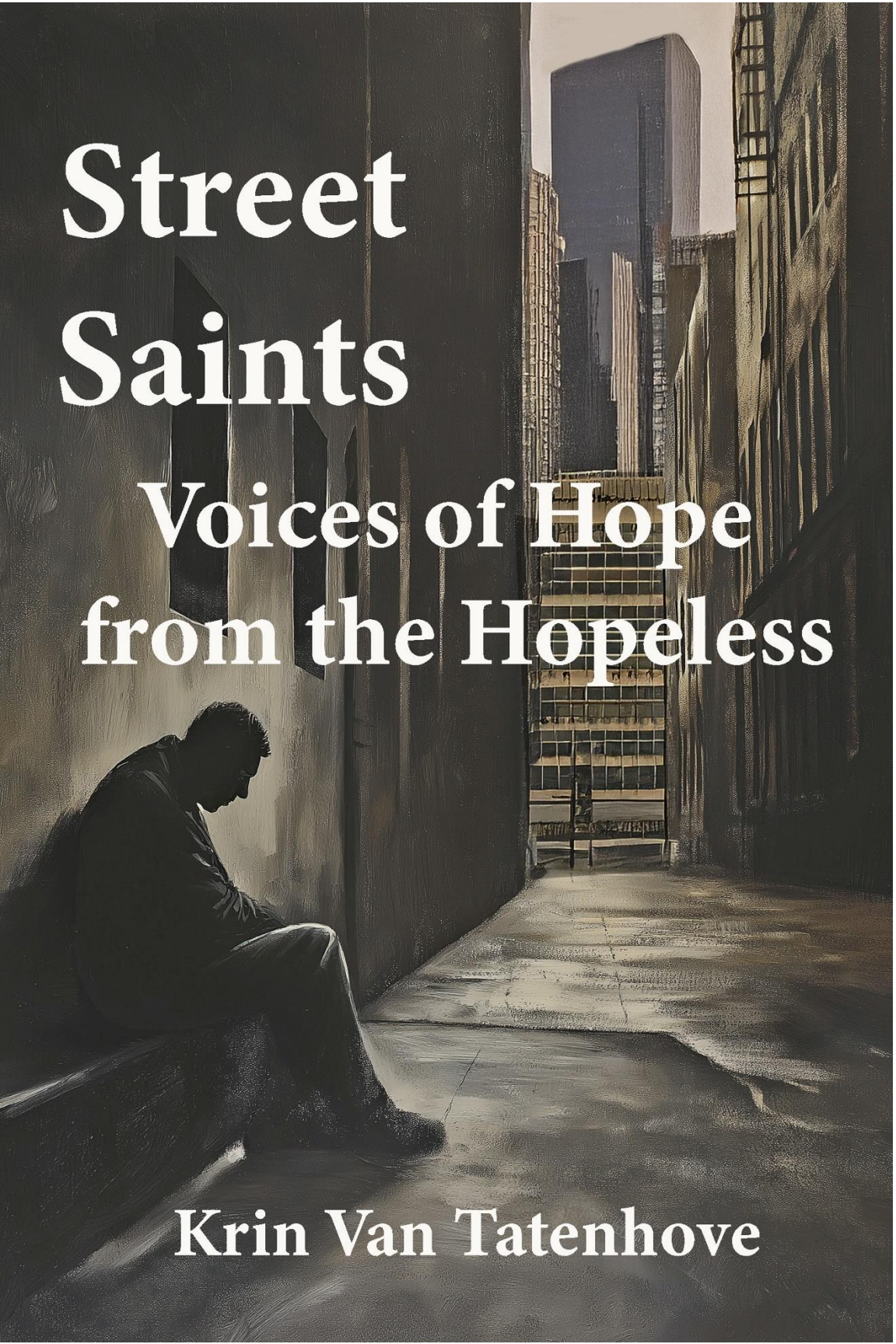
Street Saints
Voices of Hope from the Hopeless
Krin Van Tatenhove

STREET SAINTS:
Voices of Hope
from the Homeless

By Krin Van Tatenhove

Dedicated to Hugo Tale-Yax

April 25th, 2010, Queens, New York City. A 31-year-old homeless man named Hugo Tale-Yax is stabbed while defending a woman from a mugging. The Good Samaritan lies bleeding to death on the street as over two dozen people pass him without calling for help. The exterior camera of a cheap hotel catches all the action. One passer-by even takes a photo with his cell phone before moving on.

And to Baby Lucille

Heaven. What the hell is heaven? Is there a home for the homeless? Is there hope for the hopeless?
- Brett Dennen, from *Heaven*

A note about this revision…

On my website (krinvan.com), I say, **“**Anyone who has exercised their creativity for a lifetime knows that we pass through many incarnations. What I wrote or created visually years ago does not necessarily reflect who I am today. However, I have left most of it here, perhaps as a testament to how one human being can change.”

There are exceptions, especially when I see how much my theology (or lack thereof) has morphed over the decades. Such is the case with *Street Saints*, now updated to more accurately reflect my spiritual viewpoints.

I made this change because I believe the courageous stories recorded in this book still deserve to be heard. I hope you find them enriching!

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PRELUDE

It's an hour before sunset. I'm standing in line at the Presbyterian Night Shelter in Fort Worth, Texas, surrounded by dozens of inner-city denizens. Black, white, brown, young and old, male and female, sober and drunk, sane and delusional, they share one thing in common: they are homeless.

This is a harsh night to lack shelter. It's near freezing, the shadows of Fort Worth's high rises lengthening over the street like Nosferatu's claws. Wind scutters trash in the gutters. A train whistle mourns in the distance, and somewhere in the gathering twilight a baby cries.

Though I have toured this shelter extensively, I have never spent a night on its mats. This is my intent; no better way to learn than experience. But when I get near the front door, word filters back that the shelter is full. Women and children will not be turned away, nor will the elderly, but a man my age—*well, sorry*.

Rather than return home, I remain true to my mission. Across the street is a vacant lot. I find a place where I can rest against a chain like fence, my back covered, allowing me to face forward and see anyone who approaches. A chilly defensiveness settles into my bones. The streets are now thronging with those who have been turned away, those who, quite frankly, look like unsavory characters. Those who look like, well, the homeless.

I don't feel safe. Do people on the streets ever feel safe?

I take out a flimsy blanket from the daypack I'm wearing and settle back for a fitful vigil. As darkness deepens, entrepreneurs of the night emerge, the drug dealers and hustlers that make this part of the city especially dangerous. I hear them calling to each other, then lowering their voices for hushed transactions. Cars of all makes cruise slowly through

the streets, trolling for vices that are no respecter of class, gender, or race.

I don't sleep much; my chin occasionally drops to my chest before anxiety jerks me awake. In one of those sudden moments of alertness, I see a hooded shape shuffling past on the sidewalk, sex indistinguishable until she turns my way and the slant of a street light reveals her unexpectedly pretty face. She stares right through me, and I realize that under the greasy blanket thrown over her shoulders, something is moving. She pulls back the wrap to reveal a baby held tightly against her chest. A sharp gust of frigid wind nearly wrenches the cloth from her grip. She covers the child again, turns her face towards the night shelter, and begins to slouch away. She is almost out of earshot when I hear her murmur, "Help us, Jesus."

And I know, without a glimmer of doubt, that I've just laid eyes upon a street saint.

* * *

Not many of us would claim the title "saint." We reserve it for those who show moral purity, superhuman sacrifice, passionate love, or selfless service. They are the people of legends and icons. We make pilgrimages to literal or figurative sites that honor them. Thank God for their wonderful witness, but it is far removed from our mundane lives. We struggle with doubts and cravings, pride and prejudice. We cling to material things. No, we are not saints. *No way, no how*.

But this is the world's value system, not our Creator's. The overriding value we find in the presence of the Divine, one that radiates eternally, is love expressed in grace. It's a gift that none of us deserve and which none of us can earn. Yet it

continues to pour out on all those who embrace its miraculous, life-changing power.

In Christian theology, there's the belief that God looks at followers of Christ as being robed in his righteousness. Through this grace, God confers upon every believer the title of Saint.

It's a beautiful sentiment, but it needs to be expanded. I believe that whatever your notion of a Higher Power, it affirms *all* human beings in this way, regardless of their creed. This is universal acceptance; universal redemption. It is what we call in Latin the *Imago dei* stamped on all of our souls.

Is this the message proclaimed from the pulpits and rooftops of contemporary communities of faith? In some instances, yes. But far too often, religious teachings get morphed into another works-based method to earn salvation. Christian writer Brennan Manning, who died in 2013, put it this way in his landmark book entitled *The Ragamuffin* Gospel.

> *The bending of the mind by the powers of this world has twisted the gospel of grace into religious bondage and distorted the image of God into an eternal, small-minded bookkeeper. The Christian community resembles a Wall Street exchange of works wherein the elite are honored and the ordinary ignored. Love is stifled, freedom shackled, and self-righteousness fastened. The institutional church has become a wounder of the healers rather than a healer of the wounded.*

My daughter, Hanna, is a gifted musician and songwriter. One of her tunes, which is really a praise song, has circled the world, sung in prayer circles, gatherings, and retreats. The refrain is simple but profound.

This gets to the questions at the core of this book. If the gracious gift of sainthood is our identity, our birthright, how can we more fully see ourselves and each other from this heavenly perspective? How can we look past the obvious limitations of our fellow human beings and see them as children of God, unique creations the likes of which this planet has never known? How can we view their lives and ours in the light that still radiates from the Divine?

One tried and true way is to enter into the narrative of another person, to realize that no matter how disparate our lives, our humanity *always* intersects. This is especially true for those whose "otherness" is foreign to us. In my decades of ministry I strove to get people face to face with those whose color, culture, sexuality, or experience was vastly different from their own. How amazing it is to see the conversion of a heart that first hears the story of someone outside the boundaries of what they believe is acceptable. How wonderful to see the communion when they take on human faces and we embrace them!

One great example of *otherness* is those experiencing homelessness. Precious few of us have been so stripped of our dignity, health, and resources to find ourselves on the streets without shelter. Plus, there remain deep-rooted stereotypes of street people.

Jimmy Dorrell, founder of Mission Waco and Pastor of Waco's Church Under the Bridge, Waco, Texas, is forcefully vocal about these stereotypes:

In a nation of plenty, over 2 million men, women and children sleep each night under bridges, in shelters, on

friends' couches, or in the back seats of cars. They are more than people without homes. They are disaffiliated and caught in a cycle that is difficult to overcome. Unlike the stereotypical skid-row bum, only about 5 percent are really "lazy and shiftless." Instead, today's homeless are mostly baby boomers or younger. They are not transients, but primarily local residents. Most are single men with significant problems. One-third of all homeless are mentally ill, outside the institutions available two decades ago. Forty percent are alcoholics. Women and children are the fastest growing group. Most get little or no public assistance. Almost all lack support systems.

The church that Dorrell pastors, which literally holds services under a bridge in Waco, describes itself this way: *An ordinary church made holy by His presence. Black, white, brown, rich and poor, educated in the streets and in the university, all worshipping the living God, who makes us one.*

A Christian writer from an online magazine that is now defunct, attended services at the Bridge one Sunday morning. This was his impression.

I have not come to this place expecting to encounter the Holy Spirit…Hope seems to sweep through the crowd. With the twang of electric guitars, the band sings the ancient promise spoken through Isaiah: "I will change your name. You shall no longer be called wounded, outcast, lonely, or afraid. Your new name shall be Confidence, Joyful, Overcoming One." A worn,

middle-aged man standing next to me in the bitter cold, mutters, "That's a good song."

The ragged guy at the end of the row puffs nervously at his cigarette. The message of these songs is, after all, both healing and unsettling. They offer a powerful vision of hope that is so unlike life on the streets. It's the paradox of the gospel—strength perfected in weakness, honor bestowed on the humble, wisdom given to fools. Do you believe it?

Good question: do we believe it? More pointedly, will we allow this radical, paradoxical message of God's love to change us into messengers of grace? Will we let it transform our churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques into places of loving sanctuary?

I will never forget the time I was a keynote speaker for a conference at a large Presbyterian congregation in southern California. Perched high on a hill, its magnificent sanctuary has floor-to-roof windows that afford a panoramic view of Los Angeles in all its sprawling, smog-ridden glory. I parked in the lot and as I walked to the front door, I couldn't help but notice row after row of luxury vehicles wedged side by side—BMW, Mercedes, Lexus. I remember thinking that the purchase price of just a few of them would equal the total budget of many nonprofits serving the poor on a daily basis.

My message was simple that morning: Jesus literally, not just metaphorically, comes to us in the guise of the poor and suffering. I shared some of the encounters that had shaped my life: baptizing a gang member, praying with a Salvadoran immigrant in a county hospital, crying with a woman on a curb in east L.A. who had just lost her son to

gang violence, letting a homeless woman sleep on my office couch for a few hours until she returned to the streets.

I closed by asking all of us to gaze out those magnificent windows to the urban sprawl below. Can we learn to love more of this city's people? I asked. Can we learn to love them in all their colors, with all their problems and needs, no matter how foreign they are to us? Though they speak over a hundred different languages, will we speak the language of love that unites us all in a new reality?

Afterwards, I was greeting people in the spacious narthex when I felt a tug at my elbow. I turned to find a small woman, impeccably dressed, her turquoise jewelry dazzling. She had a frown on her face.

"I'm convicted by what you say, Krin. I am the chairperson of this church's Mission and Outreach Committee. We actually give a large amount of money to various charities here in Los Angeles, but I must admit something. If people like the ones you've described were to come into church and sit beside us on any given Sunday, I'm afraid many of us would feel *very* uncomfortable. There would be a physical reaction."

I admired her honesty. Doesn't she speak for many of us? It is well within our comfort zone to write checks, and those funds are certainly needed by ministries that work in the trenches. However, it is far more difficult for us to enter into the actual lives of those who are suffering, to embrace them rather than keep them at arm's length.

Contrast her candor with a poster I saw hanging on a store window in Virginia City, Nevada. It was an advertisement for a "biker church," complete with photos of road hogs sporting tattoos of crosses and scripture references. In the middle of the flyer were these words: *All*

outcasts welcome! All homeless, poor, sick, handicapped, blind, deaf, street people, widows, orphans, runaways, addicts, criminals, prostitutes, lonely people, old folks, kids of all ages, crazies, hardcore bikers of all clubs, independents and anybody else!

I imagined Jesus standing where I was and reading these same words. I recalled the day he first returned to his hometown of Nazareth and attended the synagogue. They handed him the scroll of Isaiah, allowing him to read what he wished, and he opened to chapter 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed." I imagined him with a broad smile and a guttural laugh as he thought, "Yup, these bikers get it! It's the hungry, the meek, the poor in spirit that will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven!" I laughed out loud and pumped my fist. A tourist family passing at the moment looked at me quizzically. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Praise the Lord!"

Shane Claiborne, in his powerful book, *Irresistible Revolution*, imagines that when Jesus returns, he will not tell us we didn't help the poor. He will tell us we didn't even know them. Those prophetic words penetrated my soul and have remained with me ever since.

By the end of this book, you will know a handful of street saints more fully. These are only eight stories out of millions, but they represent the diverse faces of today's homeless: veterans, women and children, the elderly, the alcoholic and addicted, the mentally ill.

Let me share a note about my methodology. Instead of interviewing dozens of people to find the most sensational stories, I listened to the first eight who were willing to share.

I did so because I believe that if we press into *any* person's story, we find the core of the human drama.

In this way, my method was similar to the old CBS news program entitled *Everybody Has a Story*, which ran from 1998 to 2004. Correspondent Steve Hartman would throw a dart at a U.S. map, fly to that city, open a phone book at random, put down his finger and call the person at that number. Provided the individual was willing to participate, he or she became the subject of his next program. Invariably, he found a compelling human story at the center of that person's life. Before he left, he would ask them to throw the dart for his next assignment.

As you encounter both the hope and brokenness of these men and women—and the faith that is restoring them—I pray your compassionate definition of sainthood will reach further into our world. I pray you will intentionally seek out the homeless in your locale, entering into their stories. And in years to come, when these interviews are no longer contemporary, or if the people involved have returned to the streets, just remember that at the moment of our encounter they risked vulnerability to leave an imprint of grace upon those who will listen.

CHAPTER ONE: LEFT BEHIND

We don't leave our wounded behind! That's an adage for every branch of the military, a basic respect for one's comrades.

But the slogan falls short once our military personnel return to civilian life. By even conservative estimates, veterans appear disproportionately in the ranks of the homeless. On any given night, over 40% of homeless men are veterans, far beyond the 27% of vets in the general population.

Like many street people, they struggle with alcoholism and addiction, but for some of them it stems from lingering post-traumatic stress disorder. Quite simply, the horrors of battle have seared them.

They served in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and the Second Gulf War. And there is a new face in their ranks—those who fought more recently in Afghanistan. The most prevalent threat these latter ones face is IEDs, improvised explosive devices, homemade weapons of our enemies that have taken a brutal toll. The shock waves from IEDs have not only killed many of our soldiers, but literally rattled the cortexes of others off their hinges. The Pentagon estimates that as many as one in five American soldiers are now coming home from war zones with traumatic brain injuries, many of which require round-the-clock attention. Some of them don't find this level of care and funnel into the streets.

Whatever one feels about the conflicts that have embroiled American forces, there is one thing I hope we can all agree upon: *the men and women caught in the crossfire of these wars risk their very lives*. We owe them compassion born of the knowledge that this warring world, still in obeisance to the myth of redemptive violence, demands sacrifice: human sacrifice.

The stories of these men and women represent living history still walking among us, but their stories are being lost to us one life at a time. In my years of ministry, I have always counted it a privilege when veterans feel comfortable enough to break the seal on painful memories. I shake their hands and tell them, "thank you, brother or sister, for serving on our behalf."

I've had the privilege to hear the stories of some true heroes.

- A survivor from the downing of the USS Indianapolis, the single most catastrophic naval tragedy in our history. On July 30th, 1945, just after he and 1195 of his comrades had delivered parts for the first nuclear bomb, they were torpedoed by a Japanese sub. The cruiser sank within 12 minutes, taking down three hundred men with it. The others were adrift in the Philippine Sea with only a few lifeboats and no food or water. Hypothermia and shark attacks left only 317 alive.
- A woman present the morning Pearl Harbor was decimated. She remembered running from her quarters to see the Japanese Zeroes darken the sky amidst the explosions. She helped tend to the massive overflow of dead and wounded.
- A Korean War veteran who was part of the Allied exodus south as hordes of Chinese soldiers, some armed with only pitch forks, flooded over the border into North Korea. Our troops retreated pell-mell through the snow, firing their guns until they were too hot to handle and sizzled their skin.
- A chaplain who performed the field service for Private Flowers, a fresh, ungainly draftee in the

Vietnam War who was the butt end of every joke in his platoon. But he was also the boy who threw himself heroically on a land mine to save his entire squad one night on patrol.

And there is that moment I will forever treasure when a vet named Bill bared his soul. I was serving as Chaplain of the main protestant chapel at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. For our mission outreach, many of us had adopted the nearby VA hospital in Columbia. Twice a month we would visit and spend time with the vets who were there being treated. For some, it was the only human contact they had outside the hospital staff.

On that particular Sunday, we split up to cover as much ground as possible. I made my way down a long, antiseptic hallway to a room in the furthest reaches of the facility. That's when I met Bill, alone in his room under a dim fluorescent light.

I introduced myself and asked him about his circumstances. He said very little, almost a bit suspicious, simply reciting his complications from diabetes. We sat in silence for a few moments. When I didn't leave, he looked at me differently, sizing me up. When I asked him where and how he had served, he focused on the chaplain's cross pinned to my lapel. I'll never know what prompted him that moment to break the seal on his memories, but he did so with sudden intensity.

Bill was a survivor of Omaha Beach, part of our country's infamous D-Day invasion of Normandy. As a history buff, I had read accounts of that heroic onslaught, tens of thousands of our troops released from amphibious transports to face Nazi machine gun nests entrenched in the bluffs. I had seen the grainy black and white photos. Some years later, I would watch Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, listening as others gasped in horror at how the invasion was recreated on the silver screen.

But even that cinematic realism would not compare to what I heard from Bill. He described the palpable fear in the landing boat, the friends standing next to him who were crossings themselves and mumbling prayers, the spatter of machine guns, the screams, the surf, the clanging metal of the ship's gates opening, and then that rush through the waves towards the sand and their destiny. He remembered being dug into a small dune at the rear of the beach, turning his head and scanning the shoreline, the utter devastation and bodies laid to waste, wondering just for a moment if God would truly use this suicide mission to turn the tide of evil in a country far from his homeland.

The memories came out in a torrent. Their weight was palpable in the room, as if we were suspended in history. I don't know if he had ever shared those haunting scenes before. He looked over at me, his eyes watery. I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"On behalf of a grateful nation, Bill, I thank you for your bravery and your service."

He placed his hand over mine, two Americans, two human beings, connecting across a sea of time and experience.

"Chaplain Van," he said, "will you pray with me?"

Let's not leave our wounded behind! Hear the stories of two American veterans reduced to homelessness.

THROUGH THE CRUCIBLE TO GRATITUDE

Aaron Rivera, 47, is still in a uniform of sorts. Emblazoned on the front of his T-Shirt is the emblem of the 75th Ranger Regiment, the Latin phrase *sua sponte*, "of their own accord" arching over it. The backside declares, "Always earned, never given." He is a slight but well-muscled man, and as he sits

across from me from me and folds his arms, I can see multiple tattoos climbing under his shirt sleeves: a naked woman, a Viking, the Harley Davidson symbol.

What surprises me against this lean, hard exterior is his sunny smile and self-deprecating laughter. He is aware of the incongruity.

"My smile and my laughter," he says, "have always been my defenses. If I can laugh, then I don't have to feel the feelings I locked away for so long."

I ask if he is willing to unlock some of them. He nods, a simple gesture of openness that is sacramental. So often we hide our pain from each other, and in that clenching we quench the power of the Spirit. I am reminded of a quote from the late Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and spiritual mentor to many:

> "We are ***all*** wounded people… The main question is not "How can we hide our wounds?" so we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness into the service of others?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

Aaron begins his story with a scene he says will "never leave him."

In October of 1983, he was a fresh recruit, jump-trained, stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, with a ranger battalion.

"I was gung-ho, happy go lucky, hooah! I had only been there about 72 hours when the light went on in the barracks in the middle of the night, signaling us to get to the flight line. We jumped up, got outfitted, made our way to the hangar, got on board the C130 and took off into the night.

"I was seated against the wall in the dark, in the belly of the bird. It was so loud, and I was thinking to myself that this must be a training mission. After a while, I dozed off until someone knocked my helmet with an ammunition box and said, 'Get loaded.' It was then I realized this was no training mission, 'cuz these were live rounds I was wracking into my rifle.

"The back door of the plane opened up and we were told to stand and get ready to jump. Almost at the very instant you could hear the ping, pop, ping of live rounds hitting the fuselage, opening up holes. The line moved forward, *go, go, go,* and then I was out into the dark, feeling the rush of wind from the jet engines, going down, flashes of light from enemy guns below, praying to get down hard and fast without being hit.

"When we hit the ground, we gathered to assess our situation, and sure enough, our platoon sergeant was wounded. We spread out and made a perimeter, still taking fire. All the rest of the night I never knew the real effect of my shooting, because you never saw live people, just pointed at the spots where their gunfire had flashed and let loose.

"At dawn we realized we had been used to help secure the airfield for the invasion of Grenada. I still get chills every time I think of that night."

There are other burning memories from his years of soldiering that still plague Aaron. Like a fateful night during Desert Storm. Part of his tour was spent in Baghdad attached to an intelligence outfit with a joint task force of French Legionnaires. One of the French soldiers, a 20-year-old kid named Broughdeux, was ostracized by the rest of the unit. He was loud, tried too hard, always bragging about what he would do when engaging the enemy.

“He reminded me a lot of myself at that age,” says Aaron, “so I took him under my wing and tried to school him, to tell him not to talk so much.”

One night found the two of them dug into a hole on a perimeter watch that stretched into pre-dawn morning. Their relief was late in arriving, and Broughdeux was so sleepy that Aaron told him to go ahead and lie down on the pallet at the floor of the trench.

“It was a short time later that I saw shapes moving in the darkness. This was the first Gulf engagement and we didn’t have all the sophisticated gear they have now, like night vision binoculars. At first, I couldn’t tell if the shapes were human, but then they began to materialize, and I saw them spreading out into a wedge formation for attack.

“I dropped down and we started taking automatic fire. I shot back and then I heard Broughdeux at the bottom of the trench trying to rack his rifle. For some reason he couldn’t do it. I heard the sound over and over. Finally, he got it right and he jumped up, his head jutting up above the hole, and just at that instant he took a round through the forehead. Instantly dead.

“I held out until our relief arrived. The hardest thing was having to pull that boy out and put him back together. All I could think was ‘why didn’t he just stay down?’ Was there something I could have done? He was so young.”

Perhaps because he has settled into our interview and feels more at ease, the easy smile is gone now. So is the mask. I can see the pain in Aaron’s eyes as he looks at me.

What he would tell me next is that the stress in his life had deeper antecedents. Strip away the traumatic memories from combat. Disregard the scars left from the time an RPG concussion grenade blew him through a wall in Baghdad. Peel back his history to his childhood.

Aaron was raised in San Jose, California, in a clan of fanatical Jehovah's Witnesses who figuratively and literally beat their beliefs into their young son.

"They employed corporal punishment freely, always justified by the Bible, of course. My mother used to sit me in front of this large blackboard where she had drawn a picture of me. It had maggots crawling out of it because she told me I was full of sin and putrid inside. If I looked away or my attention drifted during one of her lectures, she would scream at me and slap me across the face. The worst part of it was that I believed her words and grew more and more shameful inside, convinced that I was deeply flawed and it was all my fault.

"One day we went to Candlestick Park in San Francisco for a district meeting, tens of thousands of people in the stands listening to one speaker after another. I was sitting next to my Dad and I wasn't following along. So he grabbed me by the shirt, dragged me out to the parking lot, slammed me up against our car, and began to hit me with punches like he was in a fight with a full-grown man. He was a big guy, '6"2, 300 pounds. He kept slugging me until I fell to the ground, and then he began to stomp on me. I rolled on the blacktop under the car to the opposite side because I just knew he was going to kill me. Then for some inexplicable reason he stopped and I could hear him get out the ice chest. I guess he just wanted a soda. It was that moment, looking out from underneath the car, that I saw my Mom walking towards us from the stadium. She looked so carefree. She had her camera in her hand and was waving. I saw my Dad turn to her and she snapped a photo. I had repressed this entire memory until I saw that photo years later, my head showing from under the car way down in the corner.

"As if the abuse wasn't bad enough, the JW teachings gave me a twisted vision of the future. We were told to believe

that God's new order would come about even before I got into junior high. So there was no need to worry about braces for my teeth, or a job for my future. Jehovah would take care of all of that."

Aaron's smile has now turned to a sneer; and who can blame him? Anger rises like bile inside me. Though I've been a pastor over two decades, I have a love/hate relationship with organized religion. Those of us inside of it so often forget that every creed, every ritual, every sermon, every stone of every sanctuary, has a solitary purpose—to lead people into a relationship of love with our Creator. We get so wedded to the form that we forget the function! If this were confined to trivial battles over minor theological issues, it would be harmless. But we know the larger picture—oppression, abuse under the guise of holiness, blitzkriegs of bloodshed justified by Almighty decree. As John Mayer sings, "Belief is a beautiful armor; it makes for the heaviest sword."

That sword fell upon Aaron as a young boy. My heart goes out to him. I don't know how he'll react, but I reach out my hand and touch his shoulder. He looks at me and nods slightly.

"Crazy stuff, eh?"

It's no wonder Aaron became a chronic runaway by age 13, staying where he could, hanging out with gang members in the streets of San Jose. He eventually landed in juvenile detention, where he spent most of his teenager years, and where he also met an Army Recruiter. As it still does for many young men who have no vision of a future, the Army filled a void. Aaron took to it naturally, accepting the discipline, using his edge of repressed anger to fuel his advancement.

The problem was that after leaving the Army, nothing really filled that void again. He drifted from job to job, relationship to relationship in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on

the fringe of Fort Bragg. He bought a Harley and joined a motorcycle club of high-speed military types, all of them Delta Forces, Special Forces, or Rangers. Over time even those biker friends began to distance themselves from Aaron as his lifestyle and anger grew edgier and edgier. The unresolved stress of his past plagued every waking hour and pierced his sleep with nightmares.

A connection with a girlfriend brought him to Texas and a job with a trucking company. When the truck he piloted broke down, the company promised him they would fix it. This went on for days, then weeks, and Aaron's meager resources soon ran out as he stayed in low cost motels. Finally, living in the back of the truck with all his earthly belongings, he got word that the company was going out of business.

He was flat broke and on the street.

"You never imagine yourself being in that position. I had a feeling of desperation and despair. You don't know what you're going to do next, and the services that are provided are so hard to get in to."

His first stop was the homeless shelter in Arlington, Texas, but since they had no room, he made his way to the Presbyterian Night Shelter (PNS) in Fort Worth. When a bed came open, he entered the program at the Patriot House, a joint venture of PNS and the Veteran's Administration, which connected him with the resources and therapy to address the long-standing effects of his PTSD. Every week, he now has a chance to open his mind and heart to a counselor, to drive out the demons from his past, to clear away the wreckage.

Aaron recently graduated from the Patriot House, got his first apartment, and took a full-time position patrolling an apartment complex for a security company. His treatment continues, and as he feels increasingly at home in his own skin,

a wonderful thing has happened. People with various problems in the apartments have started to confide in Aaron. They sense the peace growing inside him, and they are seeking his counsel. This soldier, wounded both literally and figuratively by battles within and without, has now become a wounded healer. Further, Aaron has encountered a number of Christians who carry the message not of religion, but relationship, men and women who are messengers of grace, not shame. It has led Aaron to embrace a newfound faith.

We both take a drink from our water glasses, lean back, make easy eye contact.

"What are you most grateful for, Aaron?" I ask.

It's as if the question is something he's been waiting to answer.

"I believe that everything that led up to my homelessness was for a reason, because it made me get closer to God, to see that I can't do things on my own. I recognize that I need direction in my life, so not only do I pray, I try to take in God's word, reading the Bible daily. This is hard for me because of that old apprehension from my upbringing, but I am already seeing changes in my life.

"Krin, I am grateful to smile again, to share. I finally have the relief that comes from understanding how my PTSD affected me. All my life I took responsibility for everything that happened to me, and a lot of it wasn't my fault. After being angry for so long, after looking at everything I had ever done as not good enough, I'm finally finding some peace. Everything is coming out into God's light, and I can't stop being grateful!"

IT'S MY DUTY

It was my first day on the job in Alice, Texas—August 2010. A short Black man with a warm smile and very few teeth came through the front door.

"Are you the new pastor here?" he asked.

I nodded. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm wondering if you could help me get a room for the night. I'm a bit down on my luck. Lost my job, been sleeping in my car. I'm looking for work, but nothing yet."

I sighed inside but kept my poker face. Do you know how many times I've heard that line? The need to reconnect with grace as the foundation of our world view is essential on a daily basis. Without it, we are sorely diminished.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"William."

"Well, William. First of all, I rarely give out cash. Second, I haven't been around here long enough to check out your story with other folks. You know what I mean? To see if you are conning me about looking for work. I'm always willing to help, but I hate being lied to. How long have you been on the street?"

To William's credit, he didn't get defensive. His warm smile remained, natural, not ingratiating.

"About a month."

I stared at him; he held my gaze without flinching. My defensiveness wilted.

"OK. I'll write a check for you from my discretionary fund for one night's lodging. And I'm going to try an experiment. I'll give you some cash. When you get your job, I expect you to pay me back."

"Yes, sir," he said, his posture straightening. It was then that I saw it - the instinctive military bearing in his shoulders. I heard it in the respect of his voice tone.

"Are you a veteran?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. I served in Desert Storm with the first mechanized infantry unit that entered Iraq for mop-up operations."

"I was an Army chaplain during that time," I said, "supporting you guys stateside from Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Thank you for serving, William."

"You, too, sir."

We had an instant bond, but first impressions are often deceiving. I wrote him a check for a local flophouse hotel, handed him some cash, and we said goodbye. I doubted I would ever see him again, but I knew that if I did, I was going to ask him for his story. I don't much believe in coincidences anymore. God's timing is perfect, with more divine appointments for us than we usually recognize through the veil of daily life.

A month later, William returned. He'd found work at a local nursing home and had my cash for me. I arranged the following interview. I include it in this book because in so many ways it defies the stereotypes we have of those who end up homeless. William is not shiftless, nor lazy, nor deceitful, and his homelessness lasted a very short time. Further, as you will see in the following paragraphs, he is a living piece of American history—one that just happened to walk through my front door at the very moment I was writing this book.

William Howard Milburn, III, was born in Salem, New Jersey, where he grew up in a family that he claims was constant and supportive.

"I was always proud," he said, "that I had both a mother and father who stuck together. Most of my friends grew up in single-parent families."

From the time he was a child he wanted to enter the military, inspired by one of his cousins who flew fighter jets in Vietnam.

"As kids we always looked up to him. He had his uniform and his medals. He had been around the world and served his country. That meant something to me and my family. Besides (he grins), I watched all those John Wayne movies! I knew I wanted to be a tank driver."

As part of the Army National Guard, William finished basic training between his junior and senior year of high school, then after graduation in 1984, went on to advanced training at Fort Knox for the summer.

On the civilian side of his life, William moved to Cleveland, where he worked first as a diesel mechanic, then as a laborer in a glass factory. But when he got laid off, he decided to check with a recruiter about transferring to active duty in the Army. They gladly processed the paperwork and sent him to his first duty station in Germany.

"I loved Germany," he says. "The countryside was beautiful and the people I met were really nice. I got to see where the Berlin Wall had come down and I suddenly got this idea. I was always fond of my history teacher, a bright guy who cared about his students. So, I thought, *I'll bring him a piece of the Berlin Wall*. I thought that would be cool. I bought a piece as a souvenir, and when I went home to New Jersey on 30 days leave I went back to my old high school. I had my uniform on. He loved it. He stopped class and had me talk to the kids. Then I handed him the piece of the wall and told him what it was. I said *Germany is going to be one country again*. He loved it!"

I could see it clearly; William found pleasure in serving the needs of others. It was part of his make-up. I imagined the warmth that probably filled that teacher's heart every time he laid his eyes on that unique curio of the Cold War.

After his leave, William was transferred to Fort Bliss outside San Antonio, Texas, part of the 3rd Armored Calvary Regiment. Now a buck sergeant, he had a chance to go to the NCO academy and continue his training. He was at Bliss when Allied Forces amassed for the repulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, the world conflict we would come to know as the Gulf War. William didn't blink. He felt it was his duty to be there. He volunteered to go to Saudi Arabia as part of an advance wave unloading tanks off C-130s and preparing them for combat.

"We would drive them off, park them, check the radios, load them with live ammunition, do the necessary maintenance. These were brand new M1A1 heavies with the solid, silent tracks. These vehicles were awesome. Flat out, they could catch you on the highway for sure. When you started them up, the gas turbines sounded like jet engines. They had 11,000 rounds for the tank itself, and of course many more for the 50-caliber machine gun on top.

"By now we could hear the cluster bombs exploding across the border in Iraq, a constant background in the distance. You have to imagine this—explosions coming at the speed of a machine gun, but each one as loud as a crack of thunder. It made you tremble, especially because we knew they were miles and miles away. We would look up and see our fighter jets soaring overhead. It boosted our morale. Sometimes we'd be out getting chow and a pilot would come down low, then hit his afterburners, fire coming out the rear as the jet headed

straight up. We would cheer, thinking, *Man, that's some awesome stuff. Them boys are bad!*"

Anticipation grew among the ranks and in William's heart. Like countless veterans before him, they knew that this was what they had trained for, but the reality was stark, almost surreal. As the bombing campaign continued, they trained and trained, the alert level rising, waiting, waiting, adrenaline and tension palpable. Suddenly, the orders came to move out from Saudi Arabia into Iraq.

"We drove through the desert all night, 300 miles until we came early in the morning to our position points. We gassed up, checked our ammo. And still the B-52s and F-16s passed overhead. As a last-minute preparation for our final march, they brought in some MLRS rocket launchers and pounded the distance ahead of us."

Then they got word: make the final push. Apache helicopters screamed overhead. At first, nothing much happened, a strange anticlimax, but then they began to see Iraqis in their jeeps with AK-47s. When they were within range, William's tank commander told him to man the 50-caliber machine gun and fire. These were his first killings, and as they advanced, these little skirmishes continued until they encountered the first tanks of the Republican Guard. William could see them on scopes from far away. He would lock them in his crosshairs as the computer in the tank loaded the round. When the order to fire came, he'd pull the trigger and see the explosion in the distance, knowing he'd accomplished his deadly task.

"With one explosion I saw the entire turret come of the enemy tank before it went up in a ball of fire. At this point, I was proud of the tools we had. I was proud of being a soldier carrying out my orders, doing what both the president and my

officers told me to do. It was exciting, but I was anxious. Firing from a tank on some jeeps is one thing, but now we were within range of artillery that could do us real damage."

He pauses. His easy smile becomes more circumspect.

"Pastor I'm not going to lie about it. I wasn't just anxious. I was scared. Really scared. And that's when I called upon the Lord. I went to Sunday School, and I believe. I asked God to forgive me for my sins in case I died, so that I could sleep in Jesus and wait on him. It's funny how your early home training in the faith remains with you. I said, *Lord please give me the strength that you gave David when he slew Goliath. Just a little bit of courage to see me through. I would really appreciate it.*"

That prayer, like a calming breastplate, centered him and helped him focus. From then on, his training came naturally and carried him through the ensuing battle with all his comrades at his side. They devastated the Republican Guard in their path.

Then, only 30 miles from Baghdad, they got the orders to halt.

"Remember," he says, "this was Desert Storm. If they would have let us complete what we were doing then, we wouldn't have had to go back. I knew it! Most of us did. We just knew we would have to go back. And now we've lost another 4,000 brothers."

The fighting stopped with an eerie calm. They turned and drove back through the battlefield, collecting data on the content and numbers of what they'd destroyed.

"We saw trucks and tanks, of course, but then the mangled bodies, blackened, petrified on the ground, in their trucks, in their jeeps. The smell of death is terrible, pastor. It's like burnt BBQ. That's the best way I can describe it. I tried to

distance myself, but these were human figures. I know I'm a soldier, but as a Christian, any loss of life is a terrible thing. I remember looking at one blackened body draped from a jeep and thinking *man, that guy had a family*. It was war. I did my duty. But it was still sad."

"William," I said. "I'm glad you felt that sadness. As a chaplain, I had a message that sometimes was not real popular with my commanders. I told them that in the middle of the hell that is war, I was a non-combatant. Sure, I was there to comfort and support our troops, but also to remind them that God loves the enemy as much as God loves us. These are not gooks or rag heads; these are human beings. And until that day that we stop believing in the myth of redemptive violence, until that day we realize that war never ultimately solves anything, I will boldly proclaim this message."

"Amen, pastor."

William received two bronze stars for his valor and calmness under fire during the battle. When he returned stateside to Fort Bliss, he received an offer to go to the NCO academy. Simultaneously things were heating up in Bosnia, America wading into a civil war marked by horrendous genocide and ethnic cleansing.

"I talked to my mom," says William. "I said, *Mom, I've fought in one war. I've done my duty and served my country. I really don't want to be sent to another*."

William left the Army in April '92, moved to Waco, Texas and got trained as a Certified Nursing Assistant. He lived there for 15 years, working in various convalescent centers. He once owned a home but lost it. Though he was engaged a couple times, he never got married, never had children. He described himself as very careful, reticent to make any commitments. He wanted to make absolutely sure that if he took on the

responsibility of a wife and family, he would be able to fulfill his duty.

After 28 years of marriage, his parents divorced, and his father moved to south Texas. In 2007, his mother died—a deep blow to his spirit. When his dad also got sick, he felt moved as the oldest child to go south and take care of him. It was his duty, and there was more to it.

"Losing my mother caught me up in the brevity of life. It made me realize I wanted to get closer to my dad. I had only seen him about once a year, so I moved south. I lived with him for a while here in Alice, working in a nursing home. But I lost that job and living with my dad just didn't work out due to his need for privacy. That's how I ended up on the streets, sleeping in my car. Yeah, I was down for a little bit. But I still counted my blessings, because it could have been worse. Besides, I was always taught that if you fall down, pick yourself up again and try harder."

After two months of homelessness, William found a new job at a nursing home in San Diego, Texas. Most of us have been to places like these. Even in the best of them, the pall of old age and death is palpable, almost suffocating. For many of us, it could lead to depression. Listen to how William describes it.

"I love my residents. It's an honor to care for them. They tell me they miss me until I come back to work. When I get there, they say, *where you been*. I say, *well, they do give me a couple days off*. (He grins). It means a lot to me that they care about me that much. I give my best all day. I make them feel special. I show them dignity, always remembering that these are my elders and I was raised to show them respect. *Yes, Ma'am, Yes Sir*. I make sure my men are shaved, and I put a little cologne on them, you know, so they *feel* like men. I try to do any little thing I can do to enrich their lives. I'm determined

to make them smile if it takes all day. And I'm the one who gets the most blessings in return—smiles and hugs."

I ask him if those memories from long ago in Iraq still plague him.

"I don't have as many nightmares as I used to. Sure, there are certain triggers. If I smell burnt meat, my mind flashes back instantly to that time in the desert. But I have asked God to soften these memories, even take them away. Being able to help other people has been part of my rehabilitation. It keeps me calm and level-headed. I'm responsible for my residents. It's my duty to make sure they eat right and that they are safe."

Very few of us have motives that are completely pure. Only God has final, intimate knowledge of the inner workings of our hearts and minds. But I can tell you this: as my interview with William concluded, I felt a moment of pure clarity. I thought about the concept of duty—for country, family, church, my neighbor, the homeless man or woman who might walk through my office door the very next day. My calling crystallized inside me and gave me a sense of purpose and dignity. William had blessed me mightily and I told him so. He rose from the chair on the other side of my desk and straightened his bearing. Though he was not in uniform, I could see it.

"My privilege, sir," he said. "I hope to see you again soon.

Then he did an about-face and left.

CHAPTER TWO:
OUR COUNTRY'S MOST DESTRUCTIVE DISEASE

Let me take a poll to start this chapter. How many of you have been impacted by addiction, either your own or the habit of a family member? Chances are that if we tabulated the poll this instant, it would bear out American statistics from the Center for Disease Control. Nearly 1 out of every 6 Americans has a substance abuse problem, and with many it is a disease that is progressive, degenerative, and eventually, fatal. If you extrapolate that to the other lives they are affecting, the number climbs astronomically.

And make no mistake: it is surely a disease, not a weakness of the will. This is a fact ratified by the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization. Anyone who has struggled with the downward spiral of addiction knows this: pure willpower alone rarely works. Despite countless efforts to control their condition, addicts and alcoholics only find themselves further along the pathway to destruction.

Unless you are a member of AA or NA, chances are you have never read their Big Books, compilations of their movements' life-saving tenets. At the beginning of each meeting, portions of these texts are read out loud to indelibly imprint knowledge of this disease which is baffling, cunning, and powerful. Here are some key truths of AA's Big Book for the uninitiated, with Big Book quotes in italics.

- Alcoholism/addiction, as already mentioned, is progressive. *Over any considerable period we get*

worse, never better. This is true even when the habit seems arrested. Countless stories corroborate that the first drink or drug—even after a significant period of sobriety—leads inexorably to consuming as much or more as before.

- Alcoholism/addiction leads to *pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization*. This is the low point that very few people other than the addicted truly understand.
- Given these realities, control remains a tempting and destructive illusion. Despite countless attempts to alter their patterns, *no alcoholic (or addict) ever achieves control*. The only remedy is complete sobriety, embracing a program that represents surrender, honesty, and service to others.

The prevalent stereotype of a homeless derelict is one who panhandles to buy cheap wine. Then, reeking to high heaven, he or she sleeps off the stupor in a back alleyway over a steamy grate (if lucky). There is much truth in this stereotype. In AA rooms, I have heard the stories of those who ended up in the gutter, begging for change to buy a 48-ounce malt liquor, then sleeping with that bottle as a pillow so no one would swipe it. I have seen men and women in their 20s aged far beyond their years, ravaged by drink and what the Big Book calls its "incomprehensible demoralization."

Yet I ask you to join me and look deeper. See the child of God beneath the often disgusting outward appearance. Try to understand this sad disease, this genetic compulsion that has turned countless men and women into untouchables, consigned to the legions of the near dead.

Why don't they just stop? No one is placing the bottle in their hands. No one is sticking the needle in their arms or the pipe to their lips. These are the comments I have so often encountered. But I want you to know how often most of these men and women have tried to stop. I want you to imagine the agony of waking up countless times with a hangover exacerbated by waves of shame. ***I want you to understand that this is a disease.*** Neil Young had it right in singing about the tragedy of addiction: *Every junkie's like a setting sun*. Likewise, every person dying from whatever drug of choice is like a setting sun, initially created in beauty by God but now sinking slowly into the abyss of a terrible malady.

Do you still hold this disease in a different category than others? If I told you that right now thousands of women with breast cancer were walking the streets homeless and uncared for, would it mobilize you into action with instant compassion? If I told you scores of men and women in the final stages of Lou Gehrig's disease were stranded right now in the gutters, paralyzed and unable to maneuver their wheelchairs, would you gladly grab the handles and guide them to help?

Do you think these analogies are spurious? *Wait*, you say, *someone stricken with cancer or ALS is a victim of a disease. Someone with alcoholism has the choice to put the drink away; it's as simple as that.*

If you think it is that simple, you have ***never*** struggled firsthand with this disease. You have never had to utterly surrender your willpower to God in order for there to be any hope of recovery.

Further: especially for alcoholics, trying to recover from this disease in a culture awash with booze is no mean fete. I am not a prohibitionist, but I believe we live with a very acceptable form of social schizophrenia in America. We decry the harm

done by the trafficking and abuse of illegal drugs such as meth, cocaine, or pot, but don't blink an eye when billboards and television ads glamorize drinking. American children view an average of 2,000 television ads for beer and wine per year. No wonder the rate of drinking among American teens is skyrocketing. Now think: for every one of them who lifts that first bottle or glass, it is a game of Russian Roulette. 1 out of 6 will pull the trigger with a bullet in the chamber.

The two stories that follow are meant to humanize those who struggle with alcohol and drugs, whose enslavement drove them to the utter demoralization and degradation that every alcoholic understands. It also drove them to the streets.

Because of personal experience of the havoc wreaked by this disease, I intentionally seek out alcoholics and addicts.

This is what led me to my friendship with Henry, an aged gangbanger with tattoo-covered arms and eyes jaundiced deep yellow from a failing liver. Henry entered the doors of the church I served because he wanted a new start. Baptized as an infant, he asked me if he could rededicate his life to Jesus so that God could help him choose life rather than death. I'll never forget the Sunday he came forward and our congregation, steeped in the grace of Jesus, gathered around him to lay on hands in prayer. Embarrassed of his yellow eyes, he was still wearing his sunglasses.

"Take them off, Henry. This is family."

He removed them slowly, then looked around the circle of believers, his diseased eyes unable to mask the question underneath, "Will you accept me?" He found only love, affirmed in the Christ-like gaze of one member after another. I began to pray for saint Henry. The power of the Holy Spirit, released through the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, flowed through that sanctuary like a life-giving stream.

The last time I saw Henry, he was confined to bed. Though he had struggled gallantly, flitting in and out of AA rooms, a few relapses had taken their toll. He had only a short time to live. I sat next to him and held his hand.

"Thanks for coming, Krin. And thanks for everything you and our church have done for me and my family."

"It's been our privilege, Henry."

We just smiled at each other for a few moments; the sun was setting in his eyes. Then I said, "Henry, I want you to know the truth of who you are. Through all the bad choices you made and all the pain you caused yourself and other people, God has never stopped loving you for one instant. You have been, and always will be, precious to God. There is no shame, Henry, only acceptance.

"And one other thing. As long as I'm alive, I will let people know of that precious day when you rededicated your life to Jesus.

"He will never let you go, Henry. He has prepared a place for you."

We bowed our heads and prayed the Lord's Prayer together.

NO MORE MASKS

When Shrek turned to Donkey and said, "Ogres are like onions," he was speaking for more than his own kind. Projecting personas to the world is common for most of us. A fellow pastor once described counseling as a successive peeling away of masks, just like the layers of an onion.

With some of us, these outward projections hide deeply entrenched lies we have come to believe about ourselves. We may pay a heavy price for this incongruence. Author Tad

Williams once said, “We tell lies when we are afraid: afraid of what we don't know, afraid of what others will think, afraid of what will be found out about us. But every time we tell a lie, the thing we fear grows stronger. Caught in this vicious cycle, our years can be consumed.”

Even now, at age 48, Terry Gray is still adjusting to a simple fact: it wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. He was, after all, better than this.

“My childhood wasn’t extreme. Sure, I never knew my father, but I was blessed to have a mother who sacrificed herself and loved us very much. As a single mom with nine children during the 60s, she instilled in us the notion to be independent, to always have for yourself so that others can’t say they gave you something. She drilled it into us.”

He smiles tensely, a handsome man who looks much younger than his age.

“Don’t get me wrong. My mother could be *very* critical and controlling. Hitler was a joke to her. She left home at age 14 because she couldn’t abide by her father’s rules, and that was her attitude towards us. She said, *Listen, this is my home and I pay the bill. Do what I tell you or you can and go out there and make it on your own*.

“It’s hard to describe my Mom, but here’s an example. When I was in college there was a guy on my tennis team named Brian. He came home with me one weekend. When he walked in the door my mother said, *Brian, it’s nice to meet you. Since you’re a guest in my home you can sleep in my bed*. Brian glanced over at me with this baffled look on his face. Then my mother said, *Brian, do you know why I’m giving you my bed?* Brian was like, no. So she says, *because that’s how much respect I demand. If I’m willing to give a total stranger my bed, I want that much respect in return. Understand?*

"There was no leeway with my mom. Zero tolerance. There wasn't a day in my life when she backed off. I remember asking her one time why we never lived in a black neighborhood. She slapped the living heck out of me. She said, *when you get a job and pay rent you can live wherever you want, but I'm not working hard for what I have just to come home and find it gone.*

Terry's mother and her expectations cast along shadow over his life. I can still feel her presence as we speak.

Their family skipped around a lot when he was young, from Denver to Seattle, to Wichita to be near his grandmother, then finally to Oklahoma City, where Terry finished high school. With his mother's motives driving him, he excelled in both academics and sports—wrestling, golf, basketball, football, and his favorite, tennis. Tennis offered an air of snooty prestige that appealed to him. He readily admits that the arrogance of his mother permeated the household. Even when some of his black friends accused him of being an "Oreo" he never backed off.

Terry was the first person in his extended family to attend college; the future looked promising. Then something happened that derailed everything. He was in a business accounting class when he met a woman named Julie during his junior year. He was 19, she was 29, one of the few black girls he had ever dated. She was beautiful, intelligent, with a winsome personality. In her extraordinary family, her parents were both professional, and all the children went to Ivy League colleges.

The arrogant tennis player, so full of himself, had found someone beyond his wildest dreams, someone who challenged him. Like his mother, Julie cut him no slack. After the first time they made love, she told him, "don't ever do that again; don't treat me like one of your little girlfriends." This only increased his infatuation.

"Until I grew up, which was in my early 40s, I compared every woman in my life to her."

Consumed by his studies, sports, and the need to please Julie, Terry snapped. She wanted a man, a level of maturity he couldn't muster. It started to affect his schooling and his place on the tennis team. When he finally broke it off, he fell apart. He lost 25 pounds and says he couldn't even think straight. His family rallied around him, but he refused their consolation. He cut himself off from the pain he was feeling and fled to California. After a semester at Point Loma Nazarene University, he enlisted in the Navy. The allure of running away on a global scale was just too enticing.

He looks over at me and shakes his head with a wry smile.

"When my mother caught up to me, she went ballistic. She was absolutely certain that they had conned me into the military. She even got a state senator involved and I was called out for it during boot camp. It was crazy."

All the military ads promise to make a man out of a boy. In certain ways, this was true for Terry.

"The Navy taught me perseverance, teamwork, and tolerance. I still hold to a core military value that 'anything is possible.'"

But the essential lie of his inner immaturity remained. Only now, the gulf between his outward persona, now clothed in uniform, and his inner self grew more cavernous. And his behavior grew more destructive.

First, he got a woman pregnant. It wasn't love, never was, but having had no father, Terry was determined to make things right. He tracked the situation from various ports of call until his son, little Terry, was born while Terry was on a ship in Marseilles. When Terry returned stateside, he brought Susan to live with him, but they were never compatible. Terry's

undeveloped identity couldn't sustain the patience and love needed for a family. It was all about his own selfish needs, even though he was outwardly "doing the right thing." He and Susan fought frequently, skirmishes that turned into custody battles for Terry, Jr. This lasted until the boy was six.

That was when Terry's darkest hours began. He had begun smoking pot during college, but now the habit increased in frequency and volume. When Susan grew afraid that Terry would wrest away custody of their son, she found a chance to expose him to his superiors. Though he was able to beat formal criminal charges, he was dishonorably discharged from the Navy.

Rather than seek help, rather than remove a layer of masks and deal with what was driving him, Terry grew more arrogant, justifying his actions at every turn. He moved back to Oklahoma City, then Duncanville, Texas. Restless and angry, he experienced one relational and professional failure after another.

In 1998, living in a home in Duncanville, he met a woman who introduced him to crack cocaine. Among the drugs available on American streets, no other causes such a precipitous descent into the abyss.

"In a very short time," he says, "I became a full-blown addict. I cashed in my 401k, sold my items, lost everything. By the end of '98, I was homeless. From that point on until 2003 it was insane. I did not get in touch with my family, especially my mother. They knew nothing about this."

With no friends, isolated from his family, Terry fed the voracious monkey on his back—a habit that increased to $200 a day. He resorted to stealing and hustling, living his lie with a vengeance. He spent his nights in flophouse hotels, in the

homes of strangers, and often just on the streets. Disaster was inevitable.

"On February 2, 2003," he says, "I was out one night getting high. I was parked in an alley with a lady friend. On one side were apartments; on the other side a row of million-dollar homes. Suddenly police cars converged on us from both sides, their lights and sirens blaring. It turned out that a gate to one of the backyards was broken open."

While in jail, Terry found out that the house was actually vacant, and that the original charge of burglary wouldn't stick. But because of previous arrests for possession, the judge was stern. He gave Terry the option to enter Cenikor, a residential drug treatment center. Terry was inclined to do so until he found out that the program was 2 ½ years. On the following Monday, appearing before the judge, he declined the offer, still believing the arrogant lie that he was in control. Surely the judge would release him given the spurious nature of the burglary charges. Instead, the judge was enraged, and the gavel fell. Verdict: 11 years hard time.

At that moment, would someone in the court room have been able to tell that the verdict was a sucker punch to Terry's spleen? Would they have been able to tell that he was shattered inside? Hardly. The slightly smug smile and cynical glance prevailed, firmly affixed as the bailiff took him away.

Newly incarcerated, he received a letter from his mother, who had found out about his sentence from the internet.

"It was a total trip. It blew her away that her son, the most likely to succeed, the college tennis player on scholarship, was now in prison. She wrote me a letter. I could tell how much pain she was feeling, and I felt her genuine love for me, but in her usual style she tried to control the situation. She was going to put up $20,000 for an appeal. I told her not to bother."

Terry managed prison by hardening his exterior, consolidating the pretense of a self-sufficient man who could take care of himself. Only now he was acutely aware of the irony. Though he attended classes aimed at helping him cope with his anger and drug addiction, he was simply going through the motions, getting his ticket punched like his cellmates. Left to his own devices, no change occurred, and the distance between what he projected and what he needed inside was tearing him apart, like a man on a split iceberg, his legs frozen to separate pieces drifting apart.

Thankfully, God had a different plan for him.

"There was this guy in my dorm who invited me to a Christian class run by the Voyagers. The gentleman volunteer who was giving this class was 79 years old, but I'm telling you he looked like he was 40. We ended up being friends. I eventually joined the class, 12 weeks of Bible study, but it was that older gentleman who grabbed my heart and soul. He didn't judge me or throw the Bible at me. He simply loved God. He had this glow of an inner light in him.

"One day he pulled me aside and asked, *Terry, are you a Christian?* I said, no sir, I'm not. I'm a spiritual person. *What does that mean?* he asked. *Explain that to me.* I couldn't. He said, *I understand. You're just not sure of where you want to be, but I tell you what, anytime you want to give your life to Christ, just let me know. It doesn't have to be in front of anybody.*

"When I finally did accept Christ, it was like a house was lifted off my shoulders. It made all the difference. I mean this, Krin. That very moment, God began to do something in me that I could never do for myself."

Eventually they paroled Terry to Victory Outreach in Fort Worth, but since he was still homeless, he snapped up the

chance to enter the VA sponsored Patriot House, part of the Presbyterian Night Shelter. He began to get the support and counseling to help him reach an authentic core for his personality.

On Easter of 2010, he had a chance to visit his son, who is now 23. It had been seventeen years since their last encounter and Terry felt both nervous and tremendously guilty. All of his failure as a father, all the wreckage of his past, hung like a cloud over him. But this time he didn't run or put on a mask of false bravado.

"I was scared about his expectations. I didn't want to say or do the wrong thing. I asked God to just help me stay humble, face the truth, and accept reality. It turned out to be a wonderful visit. He's a great kid, a devout Christian who lives, eats and breathes God. The shocking thing is that he took all the stuff he witnessed, from drug use to crime, and decided to choose the opposite. God has blessed me with an articulate, passionate son who loves everyone."

We're near the end of our interview, steeped in a comfortable silence. Terry looks over at me with a relaxed smile. His demeanor has changed even in the short time we have been talking. It has been like a time-lapse video, the inner Terry catching up to the outer one, a man merging into his own skin and refusing to hide any more. The past has caught up with us and with Terry Gray, and miraculously it has arrived with a sense of peace.

"Terry," I ask him, "looking back over your life at this pivotal moment, what are the primary things you have learned?"

"As you can easily see, all my life I lived a lie. Everything that went wrong was always the fault of other people, never me. I was unjustifiably arrogant. The truth? *I* was the one who made

the bad decisions. *I* was the one who never got honest enough with himself to change. I ran from that change and held my self-deceptions inside, duckin' and dodgin'. But the only way we can move on is when we open up our issues to others, to God, and to ourselves.

"I still have a lot of selfishness in me. I have to unlearn it. After 48 years of being who I am, that's understandable. But I'm asking God for patience. There's a lot of work to be done, but I no longer use the word perfection. I use the word progress. I work on me daily and ask God for help.

"God has shown me not to take anything for granted. When I get up in the morning and pray, I honestly open my heart to Him. I praise him and wholeheartedly believe that every breath I take is a gift. Even when I didn't love me, God was always there. That has helped me understand the basic Christian outlook on life.

"I feel more clarity than I ever have before. I feel a new freedom. There's no weight on my shoulders—nothing I've got to hold back or hold onto. Nothing I have to hide. It's a newfound sense of serenity. When people ask me about my faith, I tell them all of this is because of God. I believe he exists; I believe he is watching over me. I tried every willful way in the book to make my life work and it didn't. Now I've given it all to Him."

"When my mother makes comments and dredges up the past, I tell her, Mom, I can't look in the rearview mirror and drive. What's happened has happened. All I can do is look forward. I haven't been happy with my life to this point, but with God's help I know the future will be so much better."

CHAPTER THREE: WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS

About a third of the homeless suffer from mental illness. Most have a dual diagnosis; they are often alcoholics and/or addicts as well, having used these substances to self-medicate their depression, mania, or psychoses.

Living on the street is frightening enough. When its harsh realities are heightened by delusions or crushing depression, the abyss is almost insurmountable. These folks need to be linked to mental health services, or their prognosis is more than grim.

The first coupling in this link is compassion.

I once managed a psychiatric unit in Las Vegas, Nevada. Every Monday we would gather to discuss the patients, reviewing their treatments plans and progress. The team assembled around that table included social workers, nurses, counselors, psychiatrists and psychologists. I respected their academic knowledge, but sometimes as we discussed human beings in terms of DSM IV categories and medication dosages, it became coldly clinical.

One Monday we were discussing a new patient, a young man named Danny, recently diagnosed with schizophrenia. During his admission process, his family's grief was palpable. They were seeing the end of a promising college career, a possible family, a future. As our treatment team discussed Danny in that manner that so easily becomes detached, I asked a blunt question.

"Who on this team is willing to walk across a mile of broken glass to actually develop a relationship with Danny? Who is willing to let him know that this hospital is not just a human warehouse, but a place of compassion for all people, no matter how ill?"

One of the psychiatrists smiled smugly at me, as if saying, "how naïve." However, one of my favorite nurses, Nancy, a veteran of years of psychiatric care, raised her hand and said, "I'll give him special attention."

And she did. I will never forget a moment about two weeks later. Danny's medication had stabilized his delusions and he had emerged from the fog of his psychosis. The pain of his condition was excruciating to his psyche. He did not flail, grow violent, or try to escape the unit. He simply broke down and sobbed. As I passed his room I found him on his knees, tears streaming down his check. Kneeling next to him was Nancy, cradling him in her arms. She looked up at me, our eyes locked, and that cold and sterile hospital became a little piece of heaven.

It is hard to be like Nancy and love the mentally ill with such abandon. I have had to stretch my own tolerance and acceptance. A woman who came to the door of the church I served helped me greatly in this regard. She was in her 40s, tall, leggy, with long blond hair. Huge sunglasses shaded her eyes, even indoors, and stretched diagonally across both her cheeks where large butterfly bandages, obviously applied with perfect symmetry. I didn't even ask.

"Pastor," she said, "can you help me with a place to stay tonight?"

"What about the shelters?" I asked.

"No, no. I couldn't go there. It's too dangerous. They might find me."

"Who might find you?"

"It's a long story. I just need a place to say. Please. Can you help me? Just for one night?"

There was still some money in my discretionary fund. Plus, it was time for me to go home for dinner. Why not? I agreed to drive her to a local hotel that gave me special rates.

En route, the woman, who told me her name was Sherry, decided to answer my question. She started softly then slowly gained momentum. She told me that she was a writer and musician who had penned many of the most popular movies and tunes we all enjoy. She was doing fine, she said, until she slipped and fell in a Taco Bell where no one would help her. She enlisted a lawyer to file a lawsuit, and that is when she found out that her "intellectual property" was being stolen by various movies stars, among them Danny DeVito and Barbara Streisand. Now that she had discovered their plot, these people tried to shut her up, enlisting the help of the Mexican drug cartel, then Bill and Hillary Clinton. She tried to run from them, but they caught up with her, tied her up, and abused her in many ways. She somehow managed to escape, bandages on her cheeks, but they would not relent. This unholy alliance—Taco Bell, the Mexican mafia, Hollywood hotshots, and the Clintons—had established a new headquarters at a sprawling ranch in south Texas. Their number one priority was to capture her once again and take her there for another round of torture.

She spit it all out, one of the most elaborate paranoid delusions I've ever heard. I have to admit it took my breath away. She looked over at me from the passenger seat, still hidden behind dark lenses. There was no point in marshalling reality to contradict her.

"You've been through a lot, Sherry. Are you OK?"

Silence.

"I just need a place to stay tonight."

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you to the shelter. They have different homes on the campus for different types of problems. I know a place that would fit for you.”

“Can’t do that,” she said. “They’d find me.”

I dropped her off at the motel, offering some extra cash for a meal. She thanked me, gathered up her two bags of clothes and toiletries, and entered the lobby, never looking back. She walked like a lady carrying her suitcases onto a cruise ship.

I assumed that would be the last time I saw her. Not so. About two weeks later she came once again to the door of our church. Same glasses, same bandages, same plastic bags, but more worn and ragged at the edges, as if the elements of her fear were gradually eroding her like wind against sandstone.

“Hi, pastor,” she said.

I admit to tensing up. Was she going to chronically ask for handouts? Would her delusion escalate into something I couldn’t handle?

“Hi, Sherry. Can I help you?”

“I need a place to lie down for a couple hours. Can I just sleep here for a bit?”

She was looking over my shoulder through the doorway into my office, where my couch was nestled against the wall.

“Sure, Sherry. Come on in.”

Unceremoniously, she walked to the sofa, dropped her bags, and stretched out on the cushions, collapsing with the fatigue of Methuselah after a marathon. For the next four hours as I worked at my desk on both a sermon and a newsletter article, she snored and occasionally murmured in her sleep. Suddenly she sat bolt upright, grabbed her bags, adjusted her sunglasses and stood.

“Thank you, Pastor,” she said.

I saw her to the door. She walked away a couple steps then turned. Suddenly she took off her sunglasses. I don't know what I'd expected—perhaps haunted eyes burning with the fear of the hunted. Perhaps anger or grief. Instead, her gaze was filled with warmth.

"You've been kind to me, Pastor. I hope that kindness is returned to you."

Then she replaced her glasses, turned on her heel, and walked away, entering her world within a world. I never saw her again.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

(*Note: the following story is relayed to you exactly as it was offered. Thus, it is not located in time and space as firmly as the others. I was surprised to even secure this interview; it is surely a world within our world, containing its own logic of redemption. Some of it, quite frankly, is shocking. However, I ask you to enlarge your capacity for grace with these fundamental questions. Is there any sin that is beyond God's forgiveness? Is there any individual beyond the reach of redemption?)*

I first met Tripper 48 (real name withheld by request) at the Patriot House. He's a big man, someone whose size and deep voice in his 40s make you wonder how much more formidable he must have been in his youth. It's well known that he keeps to himself, a brooder, prone to bouts of depression, a man who doesn't like to open up about his life. The few times he had, the stories were so dark and troubling that it shocked his hearers. However, the first time I met him he was unusually

loquacious. When I asked him to share about his time in the Air Force in the early 80s, he brightened up with a smile and let loose.

"I was Security Police, Base Defender. I remember a TDY exercise at a base in Panama. Jungle training. They gave us 14 days to mock capture this airfield. There were 15 of us led by a 2nd Lieutenant.

"If you've never been in the Panama Jungle, it is very thick. You can barely see two feet in front of you. It's nothing for the roots of the trees to come out of the ground because they are vying for sunlight. We got to this one area to take a break that was covered in tree roots. I sat in the crevice of a tree. It was hot, and I was tired, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a little movement. About the third time seeing it, I just told myself it was the tree root moving. But by the fifth or sixth time, my curiosity peaked. So I looked at the root closer, followed with my eyes up the tree, and it turns out it wasn't a root, it was an Anaconda! This thing had to be 30 feet long! When I saw that snake and realized that all we had was blanks in our guns, I knew this was going to be a fight I'd lose. I just took off, and when the other guys saw me running, they took off with me."

He stopped and laughed, showing the loss of most of his lower teeth.

"On that same exercise we were deep in the jungle in the middle of the night. One rule they teach you about the jungle is, if it gets quiet, something's going to go down. So, we're getting ready to camp out. You could hear the monkeys, you could hear the birds, you could hear every insect, all them goin' and goin'. It's like living in a pet shop or at the zoo. And all of a sudden it got quiet. I mean if you dropped a pin, it would echo for a hundred miles. That's how quiet it was. It was the most eerie feeling. We put our backs together in what they call a combat

circle. Even though we didn't have live ammo, we got out our knives and bayoneted our M-16s. We were ready for a fight. Then, after short period of time, the sound started up again. It was like someone had flipped the sound switch to mute, then switched it back on again."

He smiled, chuckled again, and it is the memory of that humor and light-heartedness that now causes me to be so startled. We are having our second conversation. This time it's an official interview. We meet in a small conference room of a VA building. I settle the digital recorder on a table in front of him. He squares himself, broadens his shoulders, and looks at me with dark, sober eyes. Then he tells a story of combat not experienced on foreign soils, but our own. How much is literal, how much is a product of his mental health struggles, I can't really tell. But at the moment it seems truer than true, corroborated by many other voices I have heard through the years.

"Hi, my name is, well…you can just call me Tripper 48.

"My story began long ago through different levels of darkness. When I was young my mother died when I was two. When I was five I got to see my father gunned down by the police, even though he was a cop himself. He got gunned down for arresting a white woman, for putting his hands on a white woman. When I was eight I got to see the Klan come into my neighborhood, take a neighbor of mine, beat him in front of his family, and hang him in a tree in his own yard in front of friends, family, and neighbors.

"When I was 12 I was stopped by two white cops because I fit the description of a suspect. I was chained to the wall in a basement somewhere. I was mercilessly beaten, tortured, gang-raped. This went on for a period of time. I don't know how long. Then they hung me in a tree and as I dangled there I watched

the sun go by five times. I watched the moon go by. I was cut down from the tree, tortured again, urinated upon, excreted upon, then put in a shallow grave."

Tripper says they repeatedly threw him in this grave, dug him up, tortured him, threw him back in the grave; not once, but five times.

"I could feel my soul being ripped out of me. I don't know how to describe it, other than something inside of me was just being torn away. The final time they buried me, the dirt was a lot heavier. I couldn't move. I could feel and hear bugs crawling over me in the darkness. Then I heard a voice tell me to get up. That voice, even though it was soothing, commanded authority. And I got up. I don't know how, but somehow I got up out of that grave and found my way home. I don't know how long it took me. I don't remember the trip. I don't know what guided me, but I made it to my front door and opened it.

"It was the middle of the night, and I saw my great grandmother who raised me. She was sitting there with a Bible in her hand, praying. She was by the lamp, and when she turned and looked at me as I staggered through the door, she had an expression on her face like I've never seen. She gave a God-awful scream and started crying and wailing.

"I staggered to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. And even though my eyes were swollen shut, I could still see myself. I guess you could say it was through the spiritual eye, or the Third Eye, or whatever you may call it, but I could see myself. I had bumps and bruises, blood and dirt, ashen sunken skin. I saw bugs crawling all over me. And that's when I came to the realization that I was dead. I was 12 years old and I was dead. I was out of the grave, but I was dead."

Tripper says he took five baths, each of them filling the tub with dirt and blood. Later than night his aunt, a registered

nurse, came by to bandage his wounds. Both she and his brother said that he had brought the violence upon himself for always being a militant and standing up to white people. He says that is just the way he was raised, his grandmother telling him to not only know the truth, but to stand up and tell it during times of injustice. He gives another example from that same eighth grade year in his life.

"In Bethune Middle School, a black school in a black neighborhood, we had this white American history teacher named Mr. Hall. This particular session we were discussing the Pilgrims landing in America. He made the statement that the Pilgrims came to America to teach the Indians, who were savages, how to be civilized. Well, something in me did not agree with that statement. It just felt wrong. I raised my hand. Mr. Hall recognized me, and I said*, I don't agree with the statement you made*. He said, w*hat do you mean. What's your point?* To validate my concern, I pulled out the Webster's dictionary that we had for class, and said, *Well, you called the Indians savages. Webster's defines savages as animalistic, territorial individuals, ignorant and unintelligent, running on an instinctual basis*. He said again, *What's your point?* I said, o*ur textbook states that the Indians befriended the Pilgrims, gave them land, showed them how to survive the winter, and celebrated the first Thanksgiving with them. If the Indians were such savages, why didn't they slaughter the Pilgrims as soon as they got off the boat?* Mr. Hall called me a communist son of a bitch, sent me to the principal's office, and I was suspended for three days."

Tripper's self-described battle against naked racism would be a dominant theme for the rest of his days. Here are some examples, and again, what's real, what's delusion? I couldn't tell.

While serving at England AFB, he says a squadron commander stated, “I don’t like niggers around me with guns.” There were racial fistfights and shooting incidents. Given guard duty at the back gate, he remembers the time a car full of Klansmen pulled up and began to fire their guns. He was ready for them, dug into a trench on the opposite side of the road, and shot their car to a halt. Though all the evidence corroborated his story, he was disciplined, dropped a rank, and docked pay for shooting at civilians.

Fresh out of the Air Force, his first job was as a security guard at the Louisiana Downs Race Track in Bossier City.

“I sort of liked that job because we got $7.50 an hour, one free meal a day, and all the ass you could kick. And I kicked plenty of ass, ‘cuz I had white folks coming up to me saying, *Where I’m from we don’t allow niggers to carry guns.* They would literally try to take my weapon and ammo from me, and I wouldn’t let them. I would beat them, sometimes so badly they reached over, put the gun back in my holster and apologized. It took me three months to establish my rule of authority on 2 North of the grandstand level. I put so many people in the hospital that when I came up on that floor you could literally hear people sucking in their breath. I had people take me to court, but because it was all on video, showing them trying to take my gun, the judge would throw the cases out.”

Tripper goes on to describe drifting to New Mexico, then back to Texas, a long string of jobs, every one of them, he claims, marred by confrontations over race, each community rife with police who hassled him simply because he was black. He says he taunted them to do something further.

“I dare you to do anything, because I’ve got friends. And I’ll find out who your family is and I’ll kill every last one of you.”

I ask him if he’s ever done any prison time.

"No, and I've killed many a cop. I've killed Dallas cops, Albuquerque cops. I've killed a lot of people in Louisiana, because when I came out of the grave, I did not come alone. I looked at human beings as food. I ate flesh and I drank blood. I had no compassion for any human beings. I slaughtered them, doing to them what they had historically done to blacks. I would go into white neighborhoods, slaughter their families and hang them from the telephone wire. I would strip them, castrate them, burn them, cut them up. I cursed God. I said *You sent your son down here to die for nothing. You should never have created the human race."*

He looks at me with those dead serious, sober eyes. I try not to show any nervousness or fear, and I hope he doesn't see the pronounced bobbing of my Adam's Apple as I swallow hard. It's a tense moment, but I have to ask.

"I know that you are getting help for mental illness, Tripper. Have you had any problems with delusions?'

"No."

"What's your diagnosis?"

"Severe PTSD and severe depression."

"And you say you actually did all those things? You say you've killed dozens of people and literally feasted on some of them?"

"Yes, I have."

He pauses. There is no defensiveness, no need to convince me that his words are true. What he says next is surprising.

"Now I'm trying to regain my humanity."

He squares himself again and leans a little closer to the recorder, as if he wants these words in particular to be "on the record."

"Let me tell you a story," he begins. "White people ran into a black neighborhood to this old black church. You see, they knew that with all their money and that big multimillion-dollar mega-church they had, it was nothin' but a show. They had no faith. They knew where the faith lies, in the black church. And I went to this church. It was an old raggedy place. The doors were hanging off the hinge. You could stand in the street and see all the way to the pulpit. And I saw the white folks in there. I kicked open the doors. They all ran to the pulpit, screamin' and hollerin'. As I was walking down the aisle towards the pulpit, ready to kill, this black lady dressed all in red came out of nowhere. She had a book in her hand, and she was pointing at me—dressed in bright, blood red—and every time she pointed at me, it was like someone had taken a bat and hit me. *Get back, get back*. Finally, it was like something grabbed me by my collar and snatched me out of that church. The raggedy doors shut. And as big, and strong, and evil as I was, I couldn't even scratch the paint off that door."

That vision was a turning point even before Tripper realized it. But he still needed to descend to his bottom. Ill health due to diabetes, combined with his undiagnosed and untreated mental condition, unraveled his life further. He lost his money, his townhome, his job, finally sleeping on the streets in Dallas. There he hooked up with Victory Outreach, a compassionate ministry to broken individuals.

"They took me to a service at Bethlehem ministries in Dallas, where I got up and gave my testimony. The Lord spoke to me that evening. He said *I forgive you*. I knew it was the Lord because when he said that, the feeling that came over me was like standing underneath a waterfall. The whole burden of everything I had gone through was washing off of me. For the

first time in my life since I was 12 years old, I broke down and I cried."

Tripper was on the road back from his levels of darkness. Eventually referred through the VA to the Patriot House in Fort Worth, he now has the benefits to marshal a treatment team that includes a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a treatment coordinator, a case manager, and a chaplain. He attends individual and group counseling, and faithfully takes the medication that is helping disperse his gloom. He no longer wakes up at night with the sweats and shakes that racked him his entire life.

He leans across the table towards me and I feel no fear, either in my heart or radiating from him.

"Once I relearn my humanity, I can learn to love. Once I learn to love, I can learn to accept and receive God's love. Once I learn to accept and receive God's love, I can learn to love mankind. And once I learn to love mankind, I can learn to forgive. Then I will be able to let all of this go.

"I'm working on it. God is working on me."

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MOST VULNERABLE

When a ship is sinking and they fill the lifeboats, the call is for "women and children first." This is not a sexist cry, but a realization that children, and the women who provide their primary care, are especially vulnerable to tragedy. One need only read the daily news to see this horrible truth: women raped as a weapon of war, orphaned children stolen in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake and sold into the slave trade. This vulnerability is especially true on the streets, where women and children are easily preyed upon.

Yet my research for this book has shown that women with children constitute the largest subgroup of homeless families. In some regions of the US, experts believe that 70% to 85% of all homeless families are headed by women. Here is an underlying antecedent to this shocking truth.

In the mid-90s, the United States entered a new phase in its war on poverty. It eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and created Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF placed limits on welfare checks and allowed states to use that money for programs that helped former recipients succeed as workers. Since TANF took effect, welfare rolls have declined by as much as 85% in some states. In many ways this is a step in the right direction. Anyone who works with the poor has certainly seen welfare abuse as a way of life.

However, cutting the welfare rolls as a means of combating poverty has created a new set of social problems in which poor mothers, no longer able to rely on AFDC, are at the mercy of a labor market that offers low wages, no medical insurance, little job security, and few opportunities for advancement.

Young homeless mothers face some of the bleakest economic circumstances of any segment of the U.S. population. Teen mothers are at much greater risk of being unemployed and of becoming long-term welfare dependent. The children of these young women find it almost impossible to break the cycle of poverty. Homelessness only exacerbates this dismal situation. It leads to a disruption of the education, health care, and other services these families need.

I must confess something to you. In my years of ministry, I have seen far too many children having children. I have confronted both young men and women who were having children without the means to support them. I told them, "Who do you think will support your children? You? No, the taxpayers of this community! Get a vasectomy or have your girlfriend get her tubes tied if you can't control yourself or be responsible!"

On the other hand, I have a deep respect for women who are taking responsibility for their broken lives and are trying to resurrect a future. Let me tell you about one in particular.

Jean called our church to see if someone could help her move furniture into her new apartment. She had just been discharged from the Union Gospel Mission in Fort Worth after a three month stay. Because her adult son Kevin is severely autistic, she received a voucher for a low-cost apartment through the city's mental health services. Her husband would not join her; he was still in the Salvation Army shelter trying to arrest his alcoholism.

I have a battered pick up, not really an old vehicle, just dinged and scratched from use in various missions of mercy. I always laugh and say I've given the Silverado to Jesus; he's just lent it back to me for a while. I told Jean I would be glad to help her move her household goods.

What followed was a two-hour odyssey through the underbelly of our community. It was an odyssey that would teach me a valuable lesson.

Our first stop was the warehouse of the Rescue Mission, a place that stockpiles donated goods to help the homeless outfit their first quarters following the street. Jean had a ticket to claim a used sectional. The men on the loading dock—some who were once homeless themselves—helped us haul it into the truck. The sofa was faded and stained, the springs sagging. I winced. Jean, on the other hand, acted as if she had just completed a shopping spree at Ethan Allen.

"This will look ***so*** good in our apartment! Thank you! Thank you!"

Our next stop was an impoverished neighborhood close to downtown. Scraggly weeds filled yards behind broken down chain-link fences. Roofs and front porches sagged. Cars rusted at the curb. Two children clad only in shorts ran barefooted across the street, seemingly oblivious to traffic. I watched as the door of a particularly shabby house swung open. A young Hispanic woman, flanked by two children, stepped out to peer at us. She looked no older than 19, yet her belly was swollen with a third child on the way.

"Turn here," said Jean. "There's a pastor with a little home church who has helped me in the past. See that barn-like structure?"

She pointed half way down the block. Another decrepit building came into view.

"Turn in there," she said. "One of the men from the church is going to help us."

I pulled the truck into a weed-infested driveway, and as soon as I did, a metal door slid open. A wisp of a man, Hispanic, with a deeply creased face, motioned us inside. The first thing

that struck us was a nauseating stench, a stinging assault that actually made my eyes water.

"Sorry about the smell," said the man. "We have a bunch of donated meat in one our refrigerators, but it stopped working and we didn't discover it right away."

He shrugged; I swallowed the bile. He led us into the dim recesses of the building. A battered dinette table with four wicker-backed chairs was there. Its surface was scarred and water-stained; the wicker on the chairs frayed. Again, Jean was ecstatic.

"This is so wonderful! Thank you!"

After loading them, we traveled to her new apartment. All this while, her son Kevin had lain stretched out on the back seat with a sullen expression. He hadn't lifted a finger. Jean reached around and shook his shoulder.

"Kevin," she said, "when we get there, you ARE going to help. You understand me?"

He grunted and rolled to face the back of the seat. With a strength and deftness I had not expected, she grabbed his shoulder and flipped him back around.

"Do you understand me?"

Through the rearview mirror I saw an almost imperceptible nod of his head just as we turned into the section 8 apartment complex that would be their new home. I counted what looked like three drug deals going down in the parking lot as we wended our way to a back unit.

"That's it, Pastor. Building G, number 5."

I parked at the side, surprised that Kevin grunted and rousted himself. We huffed and puffed and got the sectional around the corner to the front door. It was dismal. Concrete steps ascended to a second floor, every other one half gone. The building's chipped stucco exterior was mottled in places where

graffiti had been covered up with various colors of paint. The inside of the apartment was just as bad: popcorn ceiling paisleyed by water leaks and a chipped tile floor as sticky as a theater's after the midnight show.

Kevin and I dumped the couch, then did the same with table and chairs. Before I could say goodbye, he had slid to a back room where I saw him flop on a mattress on the floor. I made some murmurings of farewell to Jean.

"Thank you so much, pastor," she said. "My husband and I and Kevin have been praying and hoping and working for a place of our own for almost two years. Now we're here. Today, I am so grateful and I am counting every one of my blessings."

She paused and smiled at me.

"Do you count your blessings, Pastor? Do you teach your people to count theirs every day?"

A SHOT AT REDEMPTION

I am interviewing Angelina Rodriguez, 43, in a room of the Lowden-Schutts building, a shelter for homeless women on the campus of the Presbyterian Night Shelter, Fort Worth, Texas.

Angie is an attractive, energetic woman with lively sparkling brown eyes and dark hair pulled back from her face. I can see just a tinge of gray. She sits leaning forward in her chair, as if ready to spring. Or perhaps what I'm reading is the alertness of maternal instinct, ready to protect, for in her lap she holds the key to her redemption, the focal point of her hope, the motivation for her future. His name is Nicholas, not yet two years old, and he is one of the most beautiful boys I've ever laid eyes upon: a round, cherubic countenance, a shock of curly blond hair, huge blue eyes.

His gaze holds me for a moment and I am transported; he sparks a sudden montage of memories from my years of ministry.

I remember a girl at the Obrera garbage dump outside of Tijuana, where the air was acrid with black smoke, piles of burning garbage being combed through by human scavengers trying to make a living for themselves and their families. The child was barefooted, rolling something along with a stick through the dirt, the way a kid might push a ball or tin can. Yet, to my horror, I realized this was no toy, but a skull—perhaps of a dog or cat. The girl, no more than seven or eight, looked up at me and transfixed me with dark, humorless eyes.

I remember a smoggy morning outside a church I served in East Los Angeles County. In an adjacent alleyway a car had marooned during the night. It looked abandoned. Two of the tires were flat, the paint faded and covered with dust. Cracks spidered the glass. I figured it would be towed within a day, another urban relic consigned to the junkyard. Yet just as I was about to pass, a shadow stirred against the rear window. A boy no more than five raised his head and peered out at me. Again, no smile, the gazing bore through me.

I remember a timeless moment in Munnar, India. A peasant family, laborers in the nearby tea fields, was walking hand in hand past the *sari* shops and food stands that lined the streets. I was especially struck by the mother. She had to be in her late 20s, but life and hard labor had aged her beyond her years. Her creased face held a dogged tiredness. I was especially struck by her weathered and calloused hands, the hands of an octogenarian. One of them was guiding her daughter, perhaps seven or eight. What a gorgeous girl, her head wrapped in a *sari*. I motioned with my camera and asked if I could take a picture.

That photo hangs on the wall of my office, not just because of the bright colors and the beauty of the girl's brown face. It is because of the eyes—dark, lustrous, haunting. They are old eyes, eyes that have seen too much struggle, too much poverty at an early age. They are eyes that have lost their innocence due to circumstances beyond their control. The world is full of them.

Nicholas laughs, a welcome sound against the backdrop of those memories, and he snaps me back to the present. He wiggles off his mother's lap and begins to run a toy truck along the table, making motor noises to accompany its scratching. This kid is a ball of energy, loud and precocious, demanding not only his mom's attention, but mine as well. His incessant chatter will be the background of our entire interview. Spoiled? Maybe. And maybe that's just fine. Maybe that's the way it should be. Angie, unfazed by his kinesis, simply smiles at him with adoring eyes.

"He is my reason for living," she says, "the one who's got me striving to change. I don't want him to go through the things that I've endured in my life."

There is considerable weight behind that statement. Angie is someone whose experiences with homelessness—precipitated by herself and key loved ones—extend all the way back to childhood. Each of those episodes is a window on the destructive forces that have shaped most of her life.

She grew up in Stockton, California, raised by a mother who battled both manic depression and prescription drug addiction all of Angie's youth.

"She did all kinds of bizarre things, like putting a 50-gallon container in the middle of the living room and throwing stuff into it. Everything, dishes, our toys, everything. She would also set things on fire when she got depressed. I think we lost

three garages because she torched them. When she was in her 30s, she started dating a 16-year-old and that was when she and my Dad broke up.

"There were times when she just lost it, put everything in storage and took us on the road, especially when she was strung out on prescription drugs. I remember being on the streets in San Jose, with only our clothes stuffed in a few backpacks. For a couple years we were homeless and stayed wherever we could, on couches, on floors, in cars, here and there. I remember sleeping in a barn for a few nights where there was this huge owl, and I was scared. I've told my father he should have stepped into the picture and taken custody of us. But he always kowtowed to my mom because of her temper. He never took action to protect us."

Sexually active by age 13, Angelina took up with Pete, eighteen years old, and began spending more and more time with him in his apartment. Eventually she packed up and moved in with him.

"I was only thirteen," she says. "Thirteen! My mother just let me move in with him. She should have stopped it. I believe she should have stopped it. But he was a convenient babysitter because by then she was spending most of her time in the bars."

And so, a family was born in the streets of Stockton, one whose young father provided for them by selling methamphetamine. In a bizarre twist on the American Dream, the drug trade provided every material thing the Rodriguez family needed: a home, cars, food, clothing and utilities. But meth was also the chemical that nearly took Angie's life. She became a hard and habitual addict throughout her late teens and 20s, nearly dying from a stroke at age 23. That brush with death slowed her down but didn't stop her. She still dabbled with speed, and also used marijuana regularly.

It's a wonder that her two older sons were born without birth defects. But it is no wonder that her oldest son, Peter, began his own descent into drug addiction. Over time, as his disease progressed, he began to steal to support his habit, growing increasingly out of control. In what Angie calls one of the great ironies of her life, Pete started acting the part of the self-righteous father.

"He never took time to sit down with Peter. He never admitted that his own dealing and drug use were a huge source of his son's problems. He just judged him for not holding down a job and for being irresponsible. Eventually Pete ran him out of the house and onto the streets."

As fiercely maternal with Peter as she now is with Nicholas, Angelina joined her son in his flight. Once again, she was homeless, drifting with Peter to sleep wherever they could find a floor or couch that let them beach for the night. It was a lifestyle doomed to crisis.

"We were staying at a friend's house and I had been gone for the day. When I got back, Pete was out front and there were some other guys with him. Apparently, my son had tried to steal a car stereo and got caught. He broke the ignition in the car and the guy wanted the money for it right then. My son didn't have it, so the guy says, "OK, come with me." Stupidly, we got into his car and he drove us into a really bad neighborhood. He pulled up to this house, and I could tell something was very wrong. We were being set up for a hit. As the man walked to the front door I told my son," Let's go!" We started running and they chased us. We hid in someone's backyard and were finally able to call for help. It was that experience that prompted us to move to Texas."

"Mommy!" Nicholas shouts. "Mommy! Cat!"

He is pointing to a high shelf in the room. Perched up there is a wire reindeer, the kind you festoon with lights at Christmas.

"No, honey. That's not a cat, that's a deer."

She gets up. We are in a combination conference/store room. Stacked in boxes are some toys that have been donated to the Presbyterian Night Shelter. She pulls out another one and hands it to Nicholas. By now she shares my feeling that this interview is possibly more about him and his future that it is it is about hers.

"I have to get out of here, "she says. "Don't get me wrong. This place is fine. They are kind and they have provided for our needs. But I want to leave before Nick has any memory of this."

"I understand," I say. "Tell me a little more about what brought you to this juncture."

She continues her saga. Texas would be her new home because Peter's young wife had family living in Arlington. Once Peter was safely here, extracted from the streets of Stockton, Angie made trips back and forth, and on each of her sojourns, she experienced life changing circumstances.

The first time, while passing through a Border Patrol check point in El Paso, the agents found a baggie full of Xanax and Vicodin in her car, drugs with no prescription. She was placed in jail for three months, the only time in her life she has been incarcerated.

"I know you always hear about people finding God behind bars," she says, "but that's what happened to me. There was this kind pastor and some ladies from a nearby church that had an outreach to the jail. It seems everyone speaks Spanish in El Paso. I don't. But even though the actual worship service I attended was in Spanish, I could feel it. I could feel the Holy Spirit, the presence of God."

Through the prayers and guidance of that pastor, Angie gave her life to Christ and even began to read the Bible.

"My Father found out I was reading the Bible and he was really proud of me, because he's a devout Catholic and had always prayed for me."

Even though she had a new divine ally in her life, Angie continued to dabble with speed. She drifted from one job to another, living with Peter's in-laws, until she decided to retrofit her life for a new career. She returned to Stockton where she took classes to be certified in Microsoft Office, then once again returned to Texas.

That's when she got pregnant in her early 40s with Nicholas. I ask about his father. She laughs a little too casually, shrugs, tosses her head, and I see a glimpse of the flippant lack of impulse control that has dominated her life.

"I knew him just a few days, three doors down at the Budget Suite."

As if she's hearing herself with new ears, her shoulders slump.

"I wish I could find him. If he knew he had a son, I think he would be involved in Nicholas' life."

She looks over wistfully at Nicholas, aware that like too many children in American society, he will grow up without his biological father.

"My pregnancy changed everything. I stopped doing drugs of every type. The only problem was that even with my new education, there were no jobs in this economy. I stayed living with Pete's other family until they couldn't provide the room and board anymore, and they brought us here."

Nicholas, still making quite a racket, climbs back up in Angie's lap. It's his little throne, and he presides quite naturally in his kingdom. Angie hugs him from behind.

"I saw a sign the other day," she continues. "It said, 'You think you've been let down? Imagine how God feels.'"

"What does that mean to you?" I ask.

"It's simple. It means we're not doing what we're supposed to do. I feel like all through my life I kept stumbling and stumbling. I see this with a lot of people. Why are we like that?"

"It's part of being human," I say. "We miss the mark of what God has intended for us. But Angie, that's the Good News of the Christian faith. No matter how many times we stumble, God is like the father in the Prodigal Son story, not only waiting for us to come to our senses, but actually running down the path to cover us with kisses when he sees us in the distance. We can make a new start no matter what poor choices we've made. That's the message of the cross, and if we hold on to shame, it will only cripple us."

"You're right," she says. "Guilt and shame can be destructive. But that doesn't change a basic fact. I know the difference between right and wrong. I know what I'm supposed to do. I'm going to get a job and find a place to raise Nicholas. I'm going to find a church that can be a part of both of our lives. I can't take back what happened with my other boys, but I can make things different for Nick."

"It's never too late for a shot at redemption, Angie."

She wraps her arms even tighter around Nicholas, kisses the top of his head, then looks over at me. There is fierceness to her gaze, as if she is saying, "Just watch me. I can do this." But then her eyes mellow, and now it's as if they are asking, "Do you think I can actually make it this time?"

I do.

Donna West's story needs a preface, so bear with me.

Back in the early 90s, when Melody Beattie released her landmark book, *Codependent No More,* the buzz about codependency—a term borrowed from addiction theory—was in vogue. In Al-Anon, it meant being addicted emotionally to another person, futilely trying to control their habits. But talk of codependency ranged much further in our culture. Suddenly many of us discovered that we had been raised in dysfunctional families. We dredged up our pasts with a vengeance. It seemed we all lived in what R.D. Laing once called "the post-hypnotic trance induced in childhood."

At the height of this craze, with men like John Bradshaw conducting workshops for "healing our inner child," I remember seeing a cartoon in Leadership magazine. It showed a vast auditorium. Hanging from the ceiling was a banner that read, *Annual Conference: Survivors of Functional Families*. There were only three people sitting way in the back.

Dwelling too much on the mistakes of our parents is counter-productive. We all know that freedom comes from forgiveness, from moving past blame to acceptance and empowerment. But there is another unavoidable truth here. If we grow up in toxic families that withheld emotional security, it leaves lasting scars.

The simplest and most profound description of these scars came to me in a book entitled *Co-Dependence: Misunderstood, Mistreated*, by Anne Wilson Shaef. She identifies a psychological phenomenon called "external referenting." In simple terms it means this. If we grew up in a family that was full of shame rather than support, if we experienced primarily judgment and condemnation rather than grace, it can plague us the rest of our lives. Having not found

our worth internally, we begin to look externally in progressively addictive ways which cause a variety of destructive relationships and behaviors.

In a very real sense, it is this codependency and the attendant low self-esteem that has clouded the 39-year journey of Donna West. Our interview takes place in the Lowden-Schutts building. As Donna settles into the chair across from me, I can sense the uncertainty and self-consciousness of that cloud. She is a pleasant-looking woman, and her smile is warm when she lets it show. Throughout the interview I am struck by a simple truth: this is basically a good-hearted person.

Donna grew up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and when I ask her to characterize her childhood, the first thing she mentions is that her father was an alcoholic.

"When he drank, he was physically and mentally abusive. He'd spank us with a belt that had metal rings even when we hadn't done anything. But most of the abuse was emotional and mental. He'd call me fat and lazy and that I'd never amount to nothing. I don't cook because of him. I hate cooking because he always downed me and told me to get out of the kitchen. To put it mildly, he was a total ass. My mom was a very meek and mild person and she just kind of went with it. When my parents finally got divorced, I was 16, and she married a guy who was just the same, actively drinking. I just didn't understand it."

Though her father started a recovery process when she was in the fifth grade, the damage had been done. For a while he tried to show her appropriate attention and warmth, but as she says, "after six months he seemed to get bored with it." From then on, though he didn't touch the bottle, it was like he was drinking again: primarily distant and aloof, then angry and condemning when he did address her. In the parlance of AA, he had become a "dry drunk," unable or unwilling to heal the

emotional retardation of his alcoholic personality. To this day, his judgments of Donna's lifestyle and choices are so painful she can't even talk to him on the phone.

There it was at the onset—a common story in our culture awash with alcohol, but painful to hear nonetheless. The words from John Mayer's *Daughters* flit through my head: *Fathers be good to your daughters, daughters will love like you do…On behalf of every man, looking out for every girl, you are the god and weight of her world."*

Donna moved out when she was 16 to live with her older half-sister. At this point, she describes herself as sheltered and naïve. But the internal time bomb was about to go off. After graduating from high school, she immediately got married for the first time and had a son. The relationship lasted only 18 months, and the lasting estrangement from Alex, her son from that marriage, is still a profound and painful wound.

Now began Donna's unconscious magnetism towards unhealthy relationships, towards any man who would show her attention. Before she was even divorced, she met her next husband in a bar.

"Tony was different. He was from Texas and had this southern accent that made all the girls go gaga over him. The fact that he would pay attention to me was so flattering. We lived together until his brother got killed and we moved back to Texas to bury him and be with his Mom."

The Midwestern girl now found herself in Telco, a town in east Texas that sported one blinking light, two gas stations, and a "whole lot of churches."

"It was a huge adjustment," she says. "I was like, 'what did I get myself into?'"

That question was prophetic. Donna was pregnant with her first daughter, Mercedes, when Tony's mother kicked them

out of the house where they were living. Tony decided they would move to Jacksonville, Florida, and while they were en route he decided to divulge a little secret: back in Telco he had stolen some money and passed some bad checks. The long arm of the law found him in Florida. He was extradited back to Texas, leaving Donna pregnant and working as a waitress at Shoney's. The courts allowed him to return to Florida to be with her, but he had no work, and they couldn't live off Donna's meager earnings. For a while they found refuge in a homeless shelter for struggling families. That reality was harsh enough, but by this time, says Donna, she and Tony were actively using marijuana, and when Tony failed to pass a probationary urinalysis, he was yanked back to Texas and slapped behind bars. Donna followed later and lived with Tony's mother, simultaneously discovering that she was pregnant with her second daughter, Chelsea.

She pauses in our interview and shakes her head, as if she still disbelieves how her life unfolded.

"There I was. Tony was in jail, I was unemployed, caring for one infant and pregnant with another, no real friends to speak of."

Did Donna learn from that mistake? It would be wonderful to say yes, to say that the pattern of her codependency was broken early in her life. Just the opposite happened. Listen to a condensed version of the years, and the men, that followed after Tony.

- James, ten years older than her, a man whose job as a welder and machinist took him to coal mines and power plants throughout Texas and beyond. His age and job represented stability to her. During the six years they were together, he cheated on her often,

something she was aware of constantly. One day he called her from New Mexico, saying he had lost his job. Would she come and pick him up? She wasn't even through considering the logistics when he called back a second time from Colorado. He had spent the weekend fishing with a lady friend, who had convinced him it was important to spend more time with family. Disgusted beyond measure, Donna moved out.

- Next came Carrell, a man she met while living in Longview, Texas. One of their bonds was the enjoyment of smoking pot together. It was a seemingly innocent pastime that soon opened up a destructive new horizon. Carrell introduced her to meth. At first, she loved the weight loss that came with the speed. She could finally imagine herself thin, even if the side effects were horrible. She worked various jobs during the day and took online courses during the night. The only time she had for her daughters was the weekends, but by then she was crashed, no more responsive than a zombie. She was with Carrell six years, until his own descent into the maelstrom of meth led to shooting up, hallucinations, and physically abusive tantrums.
- Finally, there was Kevin. When Donna met him, she hadn't curbed her own addiction It was through her that Kevin took up the crack pipe. Though she claims they were often like best friends and he could be "very good to my girls," when he was coming off the drugs he grew increasingly abusive. "I finally left him when he broke the windshield of my car and threw me out of the mobile home."

Donna and the girls ended up in a shelter for battered women, where she went into a major depression, losing her job and meager savings. When the caseworkers helped her find an apartment, Kevin returned, promised her he had changed, and asked her to move to Arlington with him.

There is a pause in her story. She looks down at the table between us, and that cloud of confusion descends again. I've been at this still point with so many other women. Often with bruises on their face, or cuts on their lips, stripped of dignity and pride, they seemed to be ready. Surely, I remember thinking, this would be the turning point.

Donna looks up at me, almost incredulous at what she is about to tell me.

"I believed him, uprooted my life once again, and followed."

Predictably, the pattern continued: drug use, abuse, unemployment, and an added surprise—the fact that Kevin was still legally married to his former wife. Donna left for good and descended once again, this time ending up in the Salvation Army shelter in Arlington. They were a godsend. When she fell into another major depression, they linked her to mental health services, where she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and started getting both the medication and counseling that is now helping her. They assisted her in finding an apartment, but she was soon evicted for what she says were false accusations. She ended up at the Presbyterian Night Shelter.

"Tell me," I say to her. "How would you describe the underlying pattern that has contributed to this long string of broken relationships?"

"I've never thought I deserved better," she says." I've never thought a lot of myself. The first time I had sex, I was raped by an acquaintance. I was 13. When you combine that with my

family upbringing, I just never felt worthy. I felt I had to have somebody in my life, because I couldn't make it on my own. The men I was with would even tell me this, *you'll be nobody without me. You'll never make it*. I put up with all kinds of abusive behavior because I was scared. From my first marriage at 18, it was as if I was surprised a guy would even want me.

"Plus, I have always put others first, taking on *their* worries and *their* issues until I was overloaded. My counselors are trying to teach me to relax, but I don't know how to let myself just breathe.

"We have a support group here at the shelter where we work on thinking more highly of ourselves, trying to regain some dignity. The women here? You couldn't ask for better friends. I mean you'd never think you would go to a shelter and meet good friends. But I have.

"One of my biggest issues is the guilt I have over my girls, guilt because their dad was never there for them. I know it's not all my fault, but somehow I want to make up for that. They are amazingly resilient, and basically they have survived all this crap we've gone through, but I want to give them what they've never had. I've been with a lot of guys, but I've never really been Mommy and Daddy all the time. How can I make up for that?"

"Just by getting back on your feet," I told her. "In that way you will give them the legacy of a woman who learned to be strong through her mistakes. I've had the same thing with my own children—a divorce, years of drinking and unstable behavior, but I never stopped trying to learn and grow. Recently, my oldest son said to me, 'Dad, one of the things you have taught me in life is that no matter what we go through, God can help us not only survive, but grow stronger for others.' One of the promises in AA, Donna, is *we will not regret the past, nor wish to close the door on it*. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I do, Krin. I pray to God every night. I believe he is always there for us, always forgives us, and doesn't look down on us. He will always help; we just have to ask. It just gets so hard sometimes. I was raised with the belief that God would never give you more than you can handle, but I don't know some days (*she laughs*). I question God like all of us, but I know that when I'm feeling really, really down, I get alone and start praying. It makes me feel so much better. Being homeless for the third time has been so hard on me and my kids. I try to have patience with God, but then I get frustrated, and I feel like I've done everything I possibly can in trying to find a job. Now I guess I'm trying to learn to let Him take over and help me out. Even more, I'm trying to let the total acceptance of His love reach down into my heart and give me the sense of worth I never had."

"He can give you that inner security, Donna," I say. "Believe me. He can."

CHAPTER FIVE: TWILIGHT ON THE STREETS

How do you imagine your old age, your twilight years? Traveling around the country in your comfortable RV? Visiting the children and grandchildren? Finally taking those trips to exotic locales you always dreamed of? Dedicating more time to a hobby or volunteer project that has always fascinated you? Checking off experiences on your bucket list so that you don't go to your grave with regrets?

I doubt that any of us, envisioning retirement, would imagine it being spent on the streets. Yet for many older people, this is their reality.

In the last decade in America, the poverty rate has steadily increased. This has included many in the age bracket from 50-65. Though Baby Boomers may not consider this category as aged, it is certainly so on the streets. Lack of affordable housing and the inability to qualify for Medicare until 65 leaves this segment of the population in a unique situation. They age far beyond their years and rarely meet the life expectancy of others in our country.

Once on the street, elderly homeless persons often find it difficult to get around. They distrust the crowds at shelters and clinics, and so become more likely to sleep in the open. Also, some shelters are located on upper floors, inaccessible to those who cannot climb stairs. Some require their guests to stand in long lines to get a bed, which many ailing elderlies cannot manage.

Given these stark realities of living on the street, I have a certain admiration for those who continue to do so at an advanced age. A case in point was Big Mike.

While conducting an early morning church service in northern Los Angeles County, our worship was loudly

interrupted. A man about 6' 5" burst into the back door, throwing the doors open like he was accustomed to grand entrances. His soiled clothing, scraggly gray beard, and grimy hands clearly broadcasted "street person." All eyes swung his way. Once again, in that sudden pause, I wondered if the people of my congregation would practice radical hospitality and grace. To my delight I saw only welcoming smiles.

Mike had two large garbage bags in his hand, which I would later find out held the entirety of his earthly possessions. His gray-blue eyes swept the sanctuary with a crazed look. There was something fierce, almost regal about his bearing, like a King Lear from the gutters, responding to inner voices only he could hear. Perhaps because of the love he saw in those followers of Jesus, his countenance mellowed. He sat down in a rear pew, rocking slowly back and forth, muttering to himself and continuing to scan the room.

I nodded at him and continued with the service, which at that point had reached the climax of the Lord's Supper. I made the invitation to the table and a handful of elders came forward, some to distribute the elements, others to stand to the side for prayer with those who desired it.

The center aisle filled as people came forward to the table. I even remember the song we were singing: *Amazing love, how can it be, that you, my King, would die for me?* Mike had joined the line of celebrants; I could see his head towering high above the others as he approached. When he reached the front, he tore off a piece of bread, dipped it in the cup, pressed it to his lips and looked directly at me.

What did I read in those eyes? A question: *Are you real? Are you what you say you are?*

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. I placed my hand on his shoulder. At first, he recoiled, and then literally leaned

into me. He then moved to one of the prayer stations, and instead of asking for intercession with words, he just stood there and cried. The soft tears turned into a sob that wracked the room. His gargantuan body shook and trembled. The elders were awesome. They simply laid their hands on him and prayed and prayed in the power of the Spirit. The music continued: *…and it's my joy to honor you, in all I do.*

That's how our congregation's relationship with Mike began. Over the years ahead he would visit periodically, especially on potluck Sundays, when he would stuff extra food into his bags. I found out he was in his late 60s but could glean few other details about his history. His mental illness, or dementia, was more acute some days than others. We might find him angry, lashing out with non-sequiturs about Christians and organized religion. Other times he was meek and mild. Most often his breath was laden with alcohol. We occasionally offered him small jobs, even found a few old travel trailers in backyards for temporary lodging. But he never stayed in one place for long, drifting nomadically through both the streets and inner snowstorms that fell in his twilight years.

As he left one morning, bracing against the street, I thought of some words from King Lear, Act One: *O! let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven. Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!*

One winter morning in the high desert I was coming out of a coffee shop in Lancaster, California. It was chilly, desert wind knifing through my jacket, laced with the perfume of sage and creosote. Passing an alleyway, I saw a familiar color slumped against a dumpster. It was the bright blue hoodie that Mike often wore.

I walked up to his side. At first, I was afraid he had succumbed to the overnight freeze until I saw his chest rising

and falling. He had wrapped old towels around his hands and feet, like a prize fighter in an abandoned ring. A grimy blanket was his only shield against the pavement. Even here in this ignominious pose, the stench of the dumpster overpowering, I was struck by his physical stature and indomitable spirit.

"Mike," I said. "Are you alright?"

Slowly he lifted his head. Encrusted food streaked his gray beard. His icy eyes focused until I saw the spark of recognition.

He dropped one of his towels and reached up to take my hand. His own skin was surprisingly warm.

"Pastor Krin," he said. "Pastor Krin. God bless you."

"Come on my friend," I said. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

It took all my strength to help hoist him to his feet.

GRACE PLACE

This final entry is as much about a place as a person. The place is the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission in Corpus Christi, Texas. To me, it has become hallowed ground, a living, breathing testimony to the message of Christ's grace. And I'm not the only one who feels this way. Seated across from me is Terri Ewing, a current resident of Good Sam. The cane she entered the room with now leans against the table. When I ask her age, she says wistfully, "55. But travelling on the road I've traveled ages you a bit."

Certain faces speak volumes, don't they? The care lines, a knowing smile, eyes that smolder with loves lost, grief survived. Terri has such a face, and it is beautiful. Her speech is slow and measured, and she sniffles occasionally, two signs of the

methadone that she receives daily to manage her disease. Perhaps it also manages her memories.

As she sweeps her long hair back from her forehead, I'm grateful she is willing to share. Her story is remarkable in two ways—its series of sorrowful goodbyes, and its redeeming "hello" to a new family and existence.

Born in Austin, Texas, Terri spent her early years in Louisiana, first Shreveport, and then Baton Rouge. Her father was an alcoholic and her parents divorced when she was three years old. Her mother, faced with the daunting challenges of a single parent, immediately went back to school to earn a master's degree in social work, an example of self-determination that Terri regrets she didn't emulate.

Terri spent a lot of time alone.

"An only child is a lonely child," she says. "So often I wished that I had brothers and sisters to keep me company. I did a lot of daydreaming."

After her mother's graduation, they moved to Dallas, where her mom became a supervisor in a unit that treated abused women and children. Her father would visit when he could but was intimidated by the educational level of his ex-wife. Even when he did come around, the connection was tenuous.

"He was the kind of person who didn't know how to show his love or care, but he did visit as often as possible. I took what I could get."

During high school, Terri was admittedly a lackadaisical student, often staring out the window and continuing her daydreams. In those reveries, she melded with the love of her hobbies: music and scuba diving. She imagined herself performing as a singer, or cave diving in exotic locales. She says it was a wonder she graduated.

But life's best learning doesn't always happen in the cloister of a classroom. Terri's mother was a tutor of a different sort.

"She taught me about culture and music. We went to theater and musicals, enjoying the many opportunities in Dallas. I had a rich, rich life. She started my long love affair with music. We were very close. I loved her completely."

Near the end of high school, with no aspirations for college, Terri met a family that had a catering business in Dallas and began to help them. She took to it quickly and stayed with them following graduation.

"I learned how to make so many things from scratch—pies, southern cooking, down-home soul food. I stayed in that kitchen for years, working at some wonderful places in the city."

Then, at age 23, double tragedy struck. Terri's mother developed cervical cancer and died after a very painful struggle. The only child vividly remembers final hours at the hospital bedside, holding her mother's hand and whispering words of love.

"It was very peaceful. She had such a long illness that we did most of our grieving while she was still alive. So when she went to be with God, I was relieved. I went outside moments later and it was the most glorious, beautiful day. I could just imagine her floating away."

Shortly afterwards, Terri said another painful goodbye as her father also passed away. She had only two cousins left that she knew of, both of whom lived in Louisiana, but they never connected.

Was it a desire to fill her hollowness? A longing to forget? Or a simple urge from the disease already embedded in her DNA? What was the precipitating event? We'll never know, but this is when Terri developed a lifelong addiction to opiates. It

began with a prescription for Percodan following some dental work. Soon she learned how to massage a circuit of multiple dentists and doctors. Still functioning in her job at the caterers, she grew restless for a change, especially since everything about Dallas reminded her of her mother. She moved to Port Aransas, Texas, a favorite haunt of her childhood. It was there that she met her husband, Tim Chevalier.

"He had a degree in radio, television, and film, and he was also a fantastic musician. He was well-known in Port Aransas for playing in a duet with a fiddle player. We had a wonderful relationship. He was the kind of person, that when you woke up in the morning, you made sure you told him *I love you* every day. He filled that hole of loneliness that I'd had for so long. Our children were our animals, dogs and cats, and I grew very close to his parents."

They lived in a home that Tim and his father had built. It was the happiest period of her life: all of this, despite the fact that her addiction grew stronger. Terri continued to work but spent most of her personal income on her habit. Instead of rejecting her, Tim honored both his love for her and his marital vows. He helped her get approved for methadone treatment, which she has continued ever since.

"Then, in 1982," she says, "I had an accident. Spring Break in Port Aransas is crazy, crazy, crazy. I was struck by a car as I was crossing the street. It's ironic, really. I rode a Harley Davidson for years, which is dangerous enough, and here I couldn't cross a street without getting run down by a spring breaker."

The injury was serious, all of the musculature detached from the inside of her right leg. She required emergency surgery that was only moderately successful. The after effects unsettled her spine, and that is why she walks with a cane. At the time,

however, she galvanized her gumption and got back to work. She says that she and Tim continued to have a great life, very close, grateful for how God had brought them together.

And then, in 2005, the proverbial rug got yanked from underneath Terri's feet once again. Tim developed a disease that affected the oxygen level in his blood while, simultaneously, his mother fell gravely ill. Terri quickly assumed the role of full-time caretaker, shuffling back and forth between two homes three blocks apart, nursing them both faithfully. She felt tired constantly, but also privileged to be able to shower love on those closest to her. When Tim's disease progressed to the point that he had to enter the VA hospital in San Antonio, her caregiving commutes were even more exhausting.

One night she left the hospital full of hope.

"Tim told me *I'm coming home!* I thought, great, I can go back and fix things up, get everything ready and wonderful. Then, the next morning at 5:00 a.m. I got a call from the hospital. They said, w*e just found your husband. He had some kind of a stroke and I don't think we'll be able to save him.*"

Terri rushed to San Antonio with her father-in-law, where she learned that Tim was brain dead, surviving solely through life support. They had discussed this eventuality, and she humanely decided to unhook him, just as he would have done for her.

"I stayed by his bedside all night, just the two of us. I held his hand and told him over and over again how much I loved him, and that I would see him on the other side. I told him it was OK to go and wait for me, because I loved him so much and would join him some day. Then, early in the morning, the doctors came, unhooked him from the machines, and I watched him drift away. He was 47."

Tears are running in rivulets down her cheeks.

"It was an honor to be there," she adds.

I take her hand.

"I know exactly what you mean," I tell her. "As a hospice chaplain, I was blessed to be at the bedsides of so many people in their final moments. It's a sacramental experience. But I've never been there with a spouse."

She nods, acknowledging my gesture of compassion.

Returning home, Terri continued loving care for her mother-in-law, but she declined quickly, and died with Terri, once again, at her bedside.

"Even with all that loss," she says, "here is where the real tragedy sets in. I was left the house by Tim; the deed was in my name. But I noticed that my sister-in-law had grown jealous of me over time. Even though she was the first daughter-in-law, I was closer to my in-laws, mainly because I had spent so much time with them. I think my brother and sister-in-law were afraid that I would end up receiving most of any inheritance left.

"Like all of us, I've heard of families where there is hatred, intrigue and deceit, but I never experienced it personally until then. After caring for their brother and their mother like I did, they just turned on me. They swept away my father-in-law and took him back to San Antonio. He lived in a back room and they wouldn't let me have any contact with him."

Terri was unemployed now and things deteriorated quickly. Her utilities were turned off, and she says that when she desperately called her in-laws for help, they "kicked her to the curb." Without air-conditioning in the middle of a Texas summer, she and her small dog used candles at night to see. Meanwhile, she had a cut in her leg that became septic, spreading through her bloodstream and landing her in the hospital.

"When I was down, under major duress, hardly conscious, my brother-in-law came in to the hospital room with a sheet in his hand. He said that my father-in-law felt it would be better to have the home deeded back over to the family to keep it safe. I don't know why, but I signed it without reading it."

Released from the hospital after fifteen days, Terri returned home to find that all of her belongings had been moved out. When she protested, they told her, "You abandoned the house." She was literally on the street. She did not even have her dog. When the paramedics had picked her up for her recent hospital stay, they told her they would take care of the animal. She never saw it again.

Terri claims that though she was well-known in Port Aransas, working in some of its finer restaurants, no one would help her. It was a local pastor that referred her to the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission in Corpus Christi. She wended her way to their doorstep.

At this point, I have to express the concerns that have been lurking in the back of my mind this entire interview.

"Terri," I say, "please don't take this the wrong way. I am very grateful for your openness. But from my many years of counseling experience, I have learned that there are always two sides to every story. You say your sister-in-law was jealous, and that you were victimized. From her perspective, she watched her brother enable you and put up with your addiction for years. You say that the utilities got cut off because you had altruistically cared for others at the neglect of yourself. Is it possible your physical decline on methadone made you unable to care for yourself or the house? Is it possible that no one in Port Aransas wanted to help you because they were tired of someone who refused to get clean?"

She is not offended; wise enough to understand my concerns. She locks on my eyes and gazes at me intently for a full 30 seconds.

"No," she says. "This is one time I can honestly say that I was there for my in-laws. I loved them faithfully and got treated evilly in return."

It is not my place to probe any further, so we turn to the topic of Good Sam.

"This place," she says, "has been my salvation. I think I was brought here to not only survive, but to grow closer to God."

And now, let me tell the other half of this story. Let me corroborate Terri's enthusiastic endorsement. Let me tell about this "grace place."

When I first visited Good Sam, I met two remarkable people—the Director, Carole Murphrey, and the Chaplain, Donnie Cooksey. These are two Christians who understand the core of Jesus' ministry, who are steeped in grace and unwilling to let judgment or legalism infect their passion for serving. Listen how the two of them have not just ministered "to," but "with" people on the streets of Corpus Christi.

After assuming the directorship, Carole heard that many of the needs of the homeless were not met by the existing by-laws and structure of the mission. She called a town meeting with those very street people, physically ripped up a copy of those policies and operating rules and said, "Now…YOU tell me what we need to do!" As a result, listen to how grace has permeated the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission.

- It is open 24 hours a day, allowing the homeless to store their meager goods as long as they are actively involved in either chores around the facility or in the off-campus work program.

- They are encouraged to use the mission's address to receive mail and to place on applications for jobs.
- Many of the homeless have dogs that provide companionship and protection from predators. Most shelters will not allow these animals on the premises. Good Sam's answer? Become animal friendly! They established a kennel across the street, and the homeless take turns feeding and walking the animals. They have also offered shelter to over two dozen stray cats. Each has a name and is looked after by the residents, a veritable herd of feline mascots.
- Since rehabilitation back to the work world often takes months, Good Sam has established a variety of lodging options in the converted hotel that houses their operations. These include mats on the floor, bunk beds, even small private rooms. Residents are expected to pay rent after they become employed or receive their first government check. This way they can move their way up the dormitory ranks to independent living at their own pace without a stay limit, yet at the same time, not be allowed to freeload.
- Loitering on public property constitutes misdemeanor trespassing in Corpus Christi and will result in rousting by the police. What did Good Sam do? They opened a "people's park" across the street, where the homeless are encouraged to loiter. Bring us your huddled masses! Only one stipulation: if the bathroom in the park is not kept clean, the park will be closed for everyone.

Good Sam's operations encompass an entire city block, including a second-hand store, a coffee shop, and a chapel. But even these grace-filled initiatives would fail without a final key element: protection. Drugs and prostitution, so rampant on the street, will infiltrate any homeless operation that has no structure and defense.

This is where Donny Cooksey comes in. I hope to tell you his full story someday. Donny came to Christ at Good Sam, where he was resurrected from the streets and his own alcoholism and drug addiction. God also showed him his higher purpose. Using his considerable street smarts and physical stature, Donny became a one-man defender of Good Sam property. He single-handedly ran off all of the drug dealers, pimps, and thieves. This required physical force at times; some people understand nothing but violence. But it worked. Donny patrols the property daily, scanning for criminal invasion, and those unsavory elements have learned to respect both him and his perimeter. Today, after eight years of sobriety and mentoring others who are getting sober, Donny is the Chaplain and COO, as well as the protector, the shepherd.

As I said earlier, this is hallowed ground. While the gap between the rich and the poor widens ominously in our country, it is so good to have some allies standing in that gap—allies like Carole, Donny, and all the staff and board of a place like the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission.

Now, back to my closing moments with Terri.

"Carole is a remarkable Bible teacher," Terri says. "She blows me away! I always had a strong faith, but once I started going to her Bible studies, I began to understand so much more. A couple weeks ago, for the first time, I stood up and gave my testimony, saying out loud in front of others, *God, I love you so much!* It feels so good to get over that barrier."

"I've had a lot of healing in my heart. I have certainly forgiven my brother and sister-in-law, even though I think it's horrible what they did. I gave it to God, saying *here, you're going to have to take this*. And he did. It has helped me spiritually so much to let go of that."

We smile at each other, and once again I am struck by the uniqueness of this grace place. Here is a woman, age 55, physically disabled, whose only source of income is a widow's VA pension of $624 a month. She pays $380 a month to stay in a private room at Good Sam, which includes all her meals; this, in a city that has "retirement homes" costing nearly $4,000 a month. Without a place like Good Sam, Terri would be an early statistic, fading into the darkness of her twilight years without a hope.

"When I came here," she says, "I was traumatized and exhausted. And then I saw all these cats lounging around this place, and I thought, I'm going to be OK here.

"In this area of Corpus Christi, between the Salvation Army and here, I see the people wandering aimlessly, many of them mental patients. I call them the "walking dead," doing the Thorazine shuffle along these streets. They've slipped through the cracks, doped up on psych meds. It's heart-wrenching."

Amen, sister! May many more hearts be wrenched as a result of your story and the stories of all the others who dared to share their lives as street saints.

POSTLUDE

One of the dedications for this book mentions Baby Lucille. Here is the background story.

In one of my pastorates, our church helped a woman get off the street and start her recovery process. She found more than help; she entered a community of faith, a family of God, and got actively involved in the ministry. She dropped by my office one morning, clutching a small box in her hand.

"Pastor Krin, during my time on the streets I did more than my share of dumpster diving. One day as I was digging through the trash, I found this little box of ashes. It broke my heart. Made me think of the two children I aborted when I was younger. I don't know why I took it. I just felt like this baby needed someone to remember that she was here. You know what I mean? Someone to know that she actually existed?"

She handed me the box. Sure enough, it was the kind that contains ashes of someone deceased. The typed label was cryptic, saying simply Lucille, and the dates of the few days she inhabited this earth. The name of the mortuary was also there.

"Let me take this," I told my new friend. "I'll call the funeral home and see about a proper burial."

When I followed through, they had no record of her name or death, but told me that if I brought the box in, they would make sure it was buried properly and with dignity. They didn't seem surprised by such an odd occurrence, and the phone call left me feeling hollow.

Somehow, I never got around to it. That box stayed on my desk for years. I never brought it to anyone's attention, but it regularly spoke to me of both the brevity and preciousness of life. Cynics or atheists might say, "Tell us about your loving God. Tell us about the death of innocents and the predominance of

evil in our world. Tell us why someone would toss the ashes of a baby girl into a dumpster."

I hear such arguments loud and clear, but the presence of Lucille's ashes had a different effect on me. They reminded me that God never forgets, that our Creator knew us, as Psalm 139 says, while we were still being "knit together in our mother's womb." I meet that cynicism with my firm belief that even Lucille has a place in eternity.

A few months ago, I drove to a remote bend on the Brazos River in Texas. I was alone with the broad expanse of brown water moving slowly to the sea. I emptied Lucille's ashes and watched them float away, praying in a manner like this.

"Loving God, for all the children aborted into your care, for all those who lives ended abruptly due to one tragedy or another, for all the people living in shadows this very moment, whose names matter to no one but you, I pray for mercy. Even more, dear God of the widow, orphan, and homeless, strengthen my resolve to never forget, to seek out the lost as you did and enfold them in my arms as they become your arms."

I opened my eyes to see the river flowing silently into eternity.