

# New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Othello Avenue"



In the cold autumn dawn shadows blanket Othello Avenue, the parked cars and vans little more than gauzy, damp lumps, like furniture hidden beneath old sheets in a darkened room. The rising sun reveals a towering red sign with white lettering promoting, Wentworth Automotives, like some sort of beacon to the new day, and the increasing light penetrates the San Diego fog until it offers a display of dewy windshields and the dented metal of damaged bumpers and wet, warped cardboard in place of broken windows. In a 2003 VW station wagon, Robin sleeps on her right side, mouth open, the back of the front seat pushed down so that her body can conform to this rough

and barely endurable estimate of a bed, and in a white Chrysler Town and Country behind her, Michael lies prone where there once had been a passenger seat. Out of the open passenger window of an RV rise the sounds of sleep from another man, Steve, snoring amid a disaster of discard-castoff shirts, pants, cereal cartons, plastic bottles, generator cords, pop cans, stained styrofoam plates, magazines and mountains of crumpled paper.

Across the street behind a Target two cats, a Siamese and an orange tabby, stare out the windshield of a 1982 Chevrolet P30 Winnebago. Its owner, Katrina, rouses herself from a bed in the back, stretches, yawns and presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

She found the Siamese cat tied up in a plastic bag in bushes behind Target. She can't believe what some people do. Her boyfriend, Teddy, still asleep, rolls onto his side. He manages a gas station and gets off at six in the morning. Husband, Katrina calls him. Marriage a ceremony neither can afford and perhaps the fragility of their lives warns them against. Tweakers both of them but clean now. She looks out a window at the cracked street still wet from the calm night. A block away, the silence is being nibbled away by cars on Interstate 805, soon to be a madness of rush-hour traffic. Not long from now Katrina will awaken to other noises. She wonders what those will be. Some traffic, sure, this is San Diego. Every city has traffic but maybe she'll hear birdsong, too. Waking up to birds as she did as a child. Imagine. She and Teddy recently found an apartment through the housing authority. Of the nearly 8,500 homeless people in San Diego County, more than 700 live in vehicles. Almost 500 emergency housing vouchers became available in 2021 to address housing insecurity worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Katrina and

Teddy got one of the vouchers, but it took them nearly a year to find a place. One landlord told her, All people on Section 8 have bedbugs. She felt he was just lumping her into a stereotype. In her opinion, there're the bums who are content being homeless, and then there are people like her and Teddy who are working but don't have a place to live.

The landlord who finally accepted their application rents apartments on Loma Way. She offered Katrina and Teddy a two bedroom with brown linoleum floors. Much better than that cheap brown carpet so many apartments have, especially with cats. Katrina checked it out on Google Maps and thought it looked like crap. But the photo she saw was old. When she and Teddy met with the landlord they found that all of the apartments had been recently remodeled and freshly painted. Nine hundred and fifty square feet. Beats the thirty-two square feet of the Winnebago and the leaky roof. When it rains, water pours into the bedroom and kitchenette. Teddy will shove her to one side of the bed so he can stay dry, her body pressed against the frayed particleboard of a cabinet. The other day, her mother called from Utah and said a foot of snow had fallen. Tell her we got a foot of rain inside, Teddy said. When they were using drugs they draped tarps over their tent to keep out the rain. One night, Katrina had to be life-flighted out of a riverbed near the golf course behind Fashion Valley Mall because of flooding. She was detoxing from speed and shaking so bad she couldn't climb out ahead of the rising waters.

The landlord did not hold the history of drug arrests and convictions against them. As long as you tell me the truth before I do a background check, you'll be fine, she had told them. They can move in two weeks. Hard to imagine having a place after living in the Winnebago for a year. No, eighteen months. A year and a fucking half. She and Teddy didn't sleep much when they lived on the street before the Winnebago. Afraid who might walk up on them. Katrina knows three people

who died, one stabbed, two OD'd. Bad stuff. If you make someone mad they can hide anywhere and come for you about just stupid stuff. Could be a guy touched someone's backpack. People are nuts about their packs. This one dude took a guy's pack because he owed him money. The pack had his heart meds and he died that night of a stroke. At least that's what the paramedics said. Scary out there.

Robin stirs, opens one eye and watches a man walk past her car wheeling a garbage can. He picks up pieces of paper with a trash picker, peers at her, glances away and moves on in a desultory fashion suggesting that the sight of her provided only a temporary diversion from the mindless tedium of his task. She sits up, opens both of her eyes wide, squints, opens them again allowing the morning to sift around in her head until it settles into the beginning of yet another day, then she pulls the door handle, gets out and stretches. She wears a faded, green sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Short, stocky. A wrestler's build. Her brown hair falls around her cheeks. She holds a hand over her eyes against the sun. No clouds. Down the street toward The 805, a sign promoting Hawthorne Crossings shopping center shines in the sun as do the names of stores listed beneath it: Staples, Cycle Gear, Ross, Book Off, Dollar Tree.

The staff at Cycle Gear throw away bike helmets like confetti. The slightest dent and scratch and they're tossed into a dumpster. Robin has seen Teddy collect them to recycle. Teddy's out there, a hustler. He says he even finds Rolex watches but he's got to be bragging or lying or both, right? C'mon, Robin tells herself, selling just one Rolex would get him off Othello. But he and Mike keep the tweakers away. Othello Avenue is quiet for the most part but if someone parks here to get high, those two are on them and get them gone,

they sure do. Robin doesn't know Katrina and Teddy well, or Mike for that matter. Talks to them but not all the time. What's the point? Get to know people and then they leave. Katrina and Teddy aren't staying. If all goes well, she won't be far behind them.

Robin has lived in her VW for about a year. Stick shift. Saving for a new clutch. She has a clutch kit but needs someone to install it. The car is her everything. It's a mess of Burger King wrappers and coffee cups but it ain't horrible. She's not a packrat like Steve. When it becomes a mess, she cleans it and when it turns into a mess again, she cleans it again. Like her life. She works as a caregiver for a grandmother and her two-year-old granddaughter. The child's mother lives on the street turning tricks for crack, a toothless, emaciated figure peering wide-eyed into the slow trolling cars. In four weeks, Robin will move in with a man who needs in-home care 24/7. She has known him for eight years. Not well but they talked a lot over the years. A Polish guy, Harold. In his sixties, maybe seventies. He lived next door to a mutual friend. He sorted mail at a post office before he retired. He wanted to be a cop but, he told Robin, in those days the San Diego Police Department wouldn't hire a Pole. Injured his hip on the job and it's given him problems ever since. He's in Carmel Mountain Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center now. Comes out in about four weeks. She's ready to move in with him, ready for a room of her own. She'll sleep a lot the first couple of days, she's sure.

The median home price in San Diego County has surpassed \$500,000 and the median monthly rent is almost \$2,800. Some studios downtown rent for \$2,000 a month. With prices like those, Robin feels grateful for the arrangement with Harold. It won't be her place but it'll be better than living in the VW, and she'll still have time to help the woman with the grandchild. With two jobs, she should do all right. She used to clerk at a day-old bread store for four years until she

screwed up. Was going through a divorce.. Was going to casinos and losing money. She stole one hundred dollars from a cash register at work one afternoon. Got caught, got fired. Then one night at a casino she lost what little money she had left and in her fury she punched the window of a slot machine and broke it. Damn window must've been pretty wobbly because she didn't hit it that fucking hard. Prosecutors charged her with a Class A misdemeanor for destruction of property. Had to pay \$1,800 for that little bitty window plus the one hundred dollars she owed the bread company. People in charge don't play. Stuff follows you. Background checks screwed her when she put in job applications. She left her apartment with only her clothes and took to the streets. When she got tired of being in her car, she pitched a tent in one of the many canyons around the city. She tried to think of it as camping, but she missed her bed.

Mike sits in the driver's seat of the Chrysler, left elbow out the window like a bored taxi driver waiting for a fare. His blonde hair falls to his shoulders. One side of his scruffy beard skewed from sleep. Heavy set, he looks much younger than his sixty-one years. Thick body, his belly spills over his belt buckle. His black shirt, speckled with dandruff, stinks of his unwashed body. The stale air within his vehicle carries his funk. He rolls down the passenger window and feels the breezy crosscurrents. Steve appears in his side mirror walking up from behind the Chrysler, a skinny little dude the same age as Mike, T-shirt and jeans sloppy with wrinkles hanging off his body. He pauses, pokes his head in, Hey. Mike. Says he'd gone to Target for coffee and dropped his phone but someone found it and gave it back to him. Pretty lucky, huh? Stressed him out. Feels exhausted. Gonna take a nap. See you, Mike. He walks to his RV, turns to face Mike again as if to fix him there. Mike makes a face, folds his arms and looks down and

shakes his head. Steve'd lose his arms if it they weren't attached to his shoulders. He's OK. Harmless. Suffered a head injury in a motorcycle accident, or so he says. Might have TBI. Mike considers himself lucky that he doesn't have it. Or maybe he does. He can be forgetful. When he was in the army, a tank hatch cover fell on his head. Dropped him like a stick. He receives VA disability, about a \$1,000 a month.

The other day, he saw Katrina, and she told him that she and Teddy had found a place. They don't talk much but if he splurges on a pizza, he'll offer them a slice. Steve and Robin, too, if he has enough. Good for them. So many homeless people. Mike keeps his head down, minds his own business. If he sees someone shooting up in their car or loading a pipe, he writes the license plate number and calls the cops. They show up eventually. He tells the tweakers, I know what you're doing. Get out. He doesn't yell at them. That'd be a good way to get a gun in his face. Teddy always backed him up. Now, Mike just might have to settle for calling the police and leave it at that.

Every morning he drives four or five blocks, gets something to eat. He has received tickets for being parked in one place too long. Five of those and the city will tow him, and then where'd he be? Carl's Jr., it's close. Gas costs too much to go far. He has up-to-date tags so he's good there, and insurance, he's got that too. It's hard to get insurance being homeless. He lies. Gives the DMV an old address. They don't check. He loves to cook but can't in his car, of course. He warms soup at a 7-Eleven. McDonald's, Denny's, Jack in the Box, they're not too expensive. His doctor says he has high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Blood pressure off the charts. Well, doc, I eat nothing but fast food. At Costco, he gets grapes, cherries, and water. Bananas, too, but on hot days after hours in the car they begin to turn brown and spotty. In cold weather he'll buy up to six bananas. If he eats one a day, they'll be gone before they spot.

He worked as a home healthcare aide for his old man for thirty-eight years after a driver ran his dad off a highway in Arizona. It was 1979. The old man had dropped Mike off at a boy scout jamboree near the Grand Canyon and got hit on his way back home. Never did catch the guy. Mike was something like a junior in high school at the time. Yellow paint from the driver's car etched into the old man's passenger door. He flipped into a ravine. His headlights tunneled straight into the night sky. He broke about every bone that could be broken and remained in St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix for a year. Came out a paraplegic but he didn't quit living. He met a woman from San Diego, got married and moved with her to California. Mike stayed in Arizona, married his high school sweetheart and joined the Army. Bootcamp at Fort. Lewing, Washington. Served three years on the DMZ in South Korea. That was enough. Came home, got his wife pregnant. He worked at KFC, Jack in the Box, and Jiffy Lube. Bounced from one job to another. Eight months later, he and his wife divorced. Young love gets to be old love and then no love at all after a while. He had gotten into speed by then. The old man told him to come to San Diego. Mike had nothing keeping him in Arizona, so he moved, settled next door to his father in Oceanside. In 1986 he began taking care of him full time after the old man's wife left him. Like father, like son. Shot speed with his sister, who lived in Santee, a suburb.

The old man died in October 2018. Eighty-nine years old, three months shy of ninety. Had dementia in his final years. He served in Korea during the war, won a Bronze Star, three clusters. Before he got dementia in 2011, he volunteered at the VA. Mike didn't know about the medal until he sorted through his dad's things. That sort of bothers him. After so much time together, they shouldn't have had secrets. He thought they were as tight as Siamese twins. Guess not. Goes to show. He's not sure what but it does. The old man never talked about the war to anyone so he didn't deny Mike anything he hadn't denied others. And he never confronted Mike on his

drug use. Fair's, fair. But Mike wasn't anyone else. He cared for him for decades even when he was high. So much for family. Caring for the old man for so long, Mike didn't have much job experience. No résumé that'd count for shit. By May 2019, nearly a year later, almost out of money, he moved into his Chrysler. He's not using drugs now but his sister still is so he won't stay with her even if she offered to take him in which she hasn't. He stares out his windshield at Steve's RV. Steve has two grown sons. They aren't offering him a bed. So much for family.

Steve stirs from his nap as the draft from a passing car rocks his RV. He has so much crap he can't open the side door. To get out, he wriggles through the sliding window that separates the cab from the back of the RV squinching his nose, and while still on his stomach, sprawled across the driver and passenger seats, his legs bent, toes balanced against the driver's window, he opens the passenger door and crawls out to the sidewalk. Loose tennis balls and a fishing pole, follow him. He bends and tugs at his belt and a man walking pat glances at him and keeps going. Steve picks up the pole and tennis balls and drops them on the passenger seat. He went fishing the night before, caught one small fish, and threw it back. Watched it swim crookedly to the bottom and felt bad he had hurt it. He decided not to fish again giving up a diversion that began in his childhood. Loved the rhythm of tossing the line, reeling it in. Kind of hypnotic. Almost disappointed when a fish took the bait and broke the spell. He was born in San Diego but spent a big part of his childhood in a Fresno ranch house. He just saw it after God knows how many years, decades really. Super cool. He had driven his niece, Nicole, to Washington state where her husband was stationed in the Navy. She had been visiting friends in San Diego and needed a ride. When the bottom fell out of his life, Steve lived with

Nicole for a time in Liberty Military Housing – Murphy Canyon until her husband was transferred to Washington. He keeps in touch with his sons, Jacob and Gabrielle. Gabrielle is in the Air Force in New Mexico. Jacob lives in University Heights, San Diego. Computer guy. Steve uses his address for mail. Jacob lives with his daughter, Scout, 7, and his girlfriend. Not enough room for Steve, at least that's what he assumes. Jacob gave him one hundred dollars one time. That was nice. He wants to believe his boys have faith in him. He doesn't pull alarms. He doesn't complain.

Steve was on his way back to San Diego after he'd dropped Nicole off when he decided to stop in Fresno and check out his old childhood place. More developed now, nothing like it was in 69' when he was kid. He had pulled over and just looked at the low-slung brown house, closed his eyes and his memories played out like a movie. He took a bus to school, walked down the long driveway when it pulled up. Cows nearby strolled in their heavy, head-bobbing way, pausing to pull at grass, and chickens wandered fields. That night as he slept in his RV, someone stole the generator he had strapped to the bumper. In the morning, when he realized what had happened, he shook his head with the innocence of someone who could not fathom how such a thing could happen anymore than how he could comprehend inadvertently injuring that fish. He continued his drive back to San Diego and Othello Avenue.

The morning progresses. Emaciated weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk, vine-like and pale green. Palm trees sway. The noise of children and women drift from the Target parking lot. Gulls bob on currents staring down at the confusion below them and a few alight on the hot pavement of Othello Avenue snagging a speck of something before flapping their wings and rising again.

Katrina starts work at ten in the morning, stands behind the counter of the Häagen-Dazs store in Fashion Valley Mall and opens a box of paper cups. She wears a black T-shirt with the Häagen-Dazs logo and she ties her long hair in a ponytail. This is her time, the early hours. Gets more done working by herself, restocking for the afternoon and evening rush.

You have chocolate? Someone asks, poking their head in the door.

Of course.

I'll be by after lunch.

I'll be here, Katrina says.

She has worked part-time at the store for about a year and earns about \$1,600 a month. A customer, a four-year-old girl named Sophie, recently asked her to be her best friend. Katrina smiled and agreed. Another asks for pumpkin ice cream, a combination that sounds disgusting to Katrina. She has gotten to know a hairdresser and her three daughters. Another customer said he'd miss her when she told him she had applied for a job at the Target store where she and Teddy park. It would be a wonderful opportunity to work there and so convenient. Even after they move, it would be closer than Fashion Valley and better pay with benefits.

She finds a stepladder and climbs onto the bottom rung so she can reach a box of styrofoam bowls from a shelf. Raising her arms, she arches her back. Her body curves, her shirt and pants tight to her body. A man pauses by the door and admires her. She grins. It's good to be noticed. Good to feel attractive. Good to like herself, her figure. She pulls the box and sets it on the counter. Reminds herself to call her

mother. She normally does every morning but she was running late today.

Katrina was born in Orem, Utah, and moved to Huntsville, Utah, when she was eight. She liked Huntsville, a small, quiet town. No weirdos. As a little girl she could hang out with friends in a park at night and play hide-and-seek near their elementary school. Rode their bikes. In the winter they met at the ice-skating rink. Father a diesel mechanic. She has two brothers in Washington near the Canadian border. Can't recall the town. Another one still lives in Utah. Doesn't hear from any of them.

Her senior year in high school she met a guy and got pregnant four months before graduation. She doesn't know what she liked about him. He was cute: she was in love. They were young and she thought he was perfect. Even when she realized he wasn't, she stayed with him. Her parents had divorced and she didn't want her kids to grow up like that.

Stupid, she says to herself.

He didn't work, sold drugs and introduced her to heroin and pills. In 2016, they divorced. She kept the kids until her mother informed the Department of Social Services about her drug use. Katrina had tried to hide it from her, but she knew. She saw her hanging out a lot with a crowd that looked like they hadn't bathed in a month. Katrina didn't allow her to see the kids because she didn't want her mother to see her. So, yeah, she knew. Her ex-husband's aunt ended up raising the children. A blessing, Katrina thinks now. They've done better without her. A twenty-year-old son joined the Marines; her eighteen-year-old son is about to graduate high school, and her thirteen-year-old daughter joined the girls' eighth grade wrestling team. She hasn't spoken to them in two, three years. The last time they talked, it didn't go well. Pissed off at her for leaving them. They'll come around. She's different now. She writes letters and sends gifts, tries not to beat

herself up. Does it hurt? Yeah. Does she feel bad? Yeah, but she can't change the past. Guilt makes her want to get high. She's no good to them high. That's how she lost them. A lot of tweakers don't quit. Or they do but just for a minute. They stop and look around and all they see are the bushes and dirt where they live. They start thinking about the mess they've made of their lives and they get high to stop thinking. So, yeah, she feels bad but she's happy for her children. And for herself now.

Katrina did four months in a Utah prison for theft and other charges resulting from her drug use including prescription fraud. When she got out, she met a truck driver whose route included California, Colorado and Utah. He'd stop at the Flying J Truck stop in Ogden where Katrina panhandled for drug money. The trucker bought her a sandwich from Denny's every time he came through. They became good acquaintances if not friends and after five years, he told her if she ever cleaned up he'd put her up in his San Diego home. In 2017, she got on a Greyhound bus and took him up on it. He died a year later at sixty-two of cancer. Katrina started using meth again and stayed in Presidio Park. She met Teddy about the same time outside of a 7-Eleven, tall, skinny and handsome and high on speed. He had just done a ten year stretch for drug crimes. He kept getting busted until his most recent release from prison in January 2019 when he decided to clean up. He told Katrina he was through with drugs and had even stopped smoking cigarettes. He wouldn't see her unless she also quit. She did. When they received their housing voucher Teddy told her to leave him, that she'd have better luck finding a place alone. His extensive prison record, he said, would hold her back. Why would I leave you when you helped me get clean? she asked him.

With Katrina at work Teddy awakens alone. On his off days, he

hustles with the instincts he honed scoring drugs. He found twenty-six helmets from the dumpster behind Cycle Gear one night. Abandoned shirts, pants and jackets he sells at swap meets fifty cents to a dollar. Jewelry, iPhones, he finds it all. He buys aluminum cans from homeless people, a penny a pop, and sells them to recycling centers. He has \$250 worth of cans in the Winnebago. The cats squat on the sacked piles like royalty. His babies, Teddy calls them. Coils of tattoos snake down his arm and both sides of his neck. Braided hair down his back. Not like he was when Katrina met him but filled out. Buffed. A presence. He stops shoplifters busting out the back doors of Target with carts full of stolen stuff. One man yelled at him, At least let me keep the shoes! He didn't. Teddy runs Othello Avenue.

Robin knows a lot of people, even a few with homes. There's a woman she works with now while she waits for the postal worker to get out of rehab. She helps her raise a two-year-old granddaughter. The girl's mother runs the streets. This woman, the grandmother, used to live on the streets. Just got a place. Everybody Robin knows needs a little bit of help, and she's not afraid to help herself. Robin loves to work. Never once was she on welfare. Always found some kind of job even if it was only day labor. She passed those values onto her daughter, now thirty-years old living in Colorado working as a teacher's aide. Married with two kids. Robin can go out and see her anytime but she ain't no beggar. She'll visit when she has money. She's never been like the guy she sees now on the sidewalk by the shopping center, flat on his back, using his T-shirt to cover his face from the sun. No, never that bad. She always had a tent, a stove, and a good place near a highway or in a canyon when she got tired of the cramped conditions of her car. Police charged her with vagrancy more than a few times. She probably still has bench warrants from

all her citations. Was it vagrancy or trespassing? She doesn't know. Whichever, it's not worth the time of any cop that's not an asshole to bother her about it. She's met all kinds of homeless people: the desperate, the meth heads, and the general trouble kind. One guy slammed her face with a rock in a Starbucks parking lot in Clairmont. Crazy. What did she do? Nothing. Still sees him jabbering to himself. Robin knows she's a mess but she's not crazy. A little touched maybe. Takes that to survive out here.

Steve has a 1973 sHonda CT90 in a carrier on the rear of the RV. Sweet little ride. Nice orange job. Sort of a keepsake, he guesses, from his good, younger days. He was into motorcycles as a kid. In high school, he rode a Honda Cl 175. He loved the way it turned, getting low to the road. Wind in his hair bugs, in his teeth. It was all that. Not a team sport, really, motorcycling. Just him and his bike and the road. All that. He moved up to a BSA DB350 and then a Yamaha RD 400. It was fast but heavy, it felt like he was riding a bus. He traded it for a Yamaha RD 350. Smooth better handling. Nimble. An extension of himself. His wife Sandi would sit behind him, arms wrapped around his waist. First date with her was on the last day of his senior year in high school, 1979. Pretty as all get out. Captain of the drill team. They had a history class together. Married in 1985. He scrolls through old photographs on his phone. There he is in a blue helmet showing all his teeth in a wide grin; there he is crouched low over the handlebars; there he is posing with a white Labrador retriever, his two young sons and Sandi, her mouth open with the same tooth dazzling smile he has.

Steve stopped riding after he crashed his 350 in November 1988. He was out with his buddies on California-78 and Banner Grade when they stopped for a break.. A beautiful day. One of

those clear days where the sky stretches forever. The road ran into a flat stretch flanked by scrub and desert. Steve had a sip of a friend's beer, put his helmet back on and said, I'm going to see the rest of this road. Sightseeing, staring at distant mountains going eighty miles an hour. Not paying attention. He skidded, lost control and hit the pavement striking his head, brains scrambled. He remained in a hospital for three weeks. Sandi had just given birth to Jacob three months earlier. Steve tried to return to work but he couldn't focus on any one task for very long. He forgot what he was doing almost as soon as he began it. At home, he tried to help Sandi with Jacob. He understood he needed five scoops of formula to make his bottle but he couldn't remember how to count to five.

He lost his job but found another as a maintenance man with a packing company. His boss wrote down what she wanted him to do so he wouldn't forget. He was named an employee of the month one year but was laid off a short time afterward. In 2009, after years of taking odd jobs, he went on disability. Eight years later, he found a love letter to Sandi in the glove compartment of her car from another man. Steve called her all kinds of names and she slapped him and he shouted, Hit me like you gotta pair, bitch! She moved out the next day. He remained in the house until 2019 when they sold it, and then he moved in with a woman he had met on an online dating site. After two months and endless arguments, he left her and stayed with Nicole and her husband. When they left for Washington, he settled into his RV. He doesn't know where his money from the sale of the house went. He believes the IRS took thousands of dollars for back taxes but he doesn't know why and amid all his junk he can't find any documentation to confirm that. He cashed out some of his savings with the idea of moving to Mexico but he thinks he left the money in a bag somewhere or did something else with it. Whatever. He doesn't have it. He knows that much. Some days, he scrolls through his phone and looks at old family photos. He sends angry texts to friends

condemning Sandi. *She's a narcissist, cheated. I discovered her dirty, little secret.* He looks at pictures of his bikes like a lover. My beloved RD350. My beautiful RD 400. My gorgeous Super Sport 750 Ducati.

This morning, he considers the mess inside the RV. He has an older brother, Joe, in Las Vegas, a retired maintenance man. Move in with me, Joe has suggested. His son, Joe Jr., runs a pest control business in San Antonio. Steve could work for him. They've talked about it but he can't decide. Should he move to Las Vegas and be with his brother or San Antonio and work for Joe Jr? He doesn't know. He feels so overwhelmed sometimes his head hurts. Today, I'll throw away trash, he tells himself. He needs to do something.

A damp breeze tosses crumpled food wrappers across Othello Avenue. Pigeons strut, pecking at the ground. A slow moving semi-truck rattles a rusted sewer lid as it turns into the driveway of Wentworth Automotive. The driver swings out holding a clipboard and walks with a determined stride toward a door. Clouds collect in the distance above downtown .

A man pauses by Mike's car.

Two guys tried to break into my ride.

What they look like? Mike asks.

No idea. Had gray hoodies. When they saw I was in it they ran.

Thanks for the intel.

Be careful, the guy says.

Same to you.

Mike sighs. A tweaker robbed him at gunpoint not too long ago.

Ninety-five percent of the time Othello is quiet but not that day. Bastard got seven dollars, his eyes the size of dinner plates. Fucking tweeker.

Maybe it was payback for his own drug-addled days. When he was twenty-seven and doing speed with his sister, her neighbor, also a speed freak, accused him of abusing her fourteen-year-old daughter after he told her he had no dope to give. She hangs around your house a lot, she said. Maybe that's because you're fucked up all the time. She filed a complaint and the police arrested him. A public defender told him to plead guilty and she'd get him five years probation. You know what they do to child abusers in prison if you're convicted? she asked him. Scared, he took the deal. He thinks now that his lawyer screwed him to make her job easier. He checks in with the police once every thirty days. Has done that for thirty-six years. Nothing else on his record but parking tickets. He can forget about finding housing and a job. A background check will take him out faster than he can say, I didn't touch that girl. Othello Avenue allows him a kind of peace. Here he experiences no judgment.

Teddy scours neighborhoods on blue days, the days of the week when households put out their blue recycling bins. He knows the hotspots. One week he made \$1,000, and he and Katrina bought the Winnebago. He was ten years old when he arrived with his mother in San Diego in 1993, refugees from poverty and civil war in Ethiopia and devout Muslims. His mother tried to steer him away from the street, but he saw drugs as a fast way to make money and followed a different path than the one she had chosen for him. He had money and women until he didn't. Before he met Katrina, he lived for four years camped in a parking lot. He has two kids in grammar school, one son at Georgia State University. His wages are garnished for child

support. He doesn't complain. Past is past. He won't say more. Doesn't need just anyone to know his business. He lives for the future. He changed course, follows a different path.

The cats in the Winnebago settle on the dashboard and watch Katrina walk toward them after a coworker dropped her off from work. She opens a door and they rub against her ankles until she scoops food from a bag into their bowls. After being on her feet all day she would like to sit and relax but she knows if she does that she wouldn't get up again. Instead she finds a broom, goes back outside and begins sweeping the sidewalk, her way of showing appreciation for being allowed to park there 24/7. Teddy found a perfectly good generator in a dumpster that she'll use later to power a vacuum and clean the Winnebago. They purposely work opposite shifts so one of them is at the RV at all times to prevent a breaks-in. Once they move into their apartment, they'll try to work the same hours so they can spend more time together.

When she lived on the street, Katrina spent her evenings at a soup kitchen downtown. After she quit using drugs, she stopped by to show the staff she had changed. She wore makeup, had on a perky pink blouse and designer jeans. Teeth fixed. Told everyone to call her by her full name instead of her street name, Trinny. She wasn't that person anymore.

It'll be so good to get off Othello. People drive down it at seventy miles an hour, tow trucks barrel ass. What if someone hit the Winnebago while she was in it? There was an accident one time in the Target parking lot. A guy's car got smashed in a hit and run. Katrina heard the noise inside the Winnebago. The guy whose car got hit was dazed but unhurt. The airbag had knocked him almost cold. At first he didn't know where he was.

She comforted him until the police came. He was so grateful that he invited her to his beauty parlor and did her hair.

She rummages for a jar of peanut butter to make Steve a sandwich. He forgets to eat sometimes. And Mike and Robin. They might want one. She won't be back here, she knows. She won't forget about them, but there's no need to return. She'll no longer be bound by the experience that now connects them. Being homeless isn't a group sport but they do look out for one another. So, while she's here. While she's homeless. Sheltered homeless, as social workers call it because she lives in a vehicle. She supposes that sounds better than plain old homeless but whatever they call it, it still sucks. A distinction devised by people who haven't been on the street, she's sure. She reaches for a loaf of white bread, removes six slices. After she makes the sandwiches, she puts them in a bag maneuvers around the cats and steps outside.

Thank you, Steve tells her in a breathless voice that reminds her of a child.

Thank you, Robin says.

She stops at Mike's van.

Thank you, he says taking the last sandwich.

I'll see you tomorrow.

I'll be here.

Shadows spread over Othello Avenue as late afternoon progresses into evening. A clear night concealing in its depths the sounds of desolate, unsettled sleep in the cramped confines of vehicles. Except for Katrina. She looks at the clear, night sky and stares into the light of one star until

its yellow glow is all she sees. Her mind clears. She dreams in that kind of emptiness. Dreams quiet dreams of a yard, birdsong, and a cute little garden. Something small. Something clean. Something safe.