

New Nonfiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: And This Is No Matter What

Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?

Thomas Wolfe



Part One

Helen

The temperature on this Tuesday morning in Grants Pass, Oregon, is edging up to ninety degrees as Helen Cruz and Justin Wallace enter the J Street Camp. The cloudless sky is a

glazed, pale blue. Not surprising weather for late August, Helen knows. She pulls a black wagon carrying sixty sack lunches and a shopping bag of plums provided by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, where she volunteers once a week to distribute food to the homeless people quartered here. Justin, a tall, corpulent forty-year-old with a shaved head, carries himself with the muscular stride that hints of his high school sports years, before his first psychotic episode. He takes a handful of sacks from the wagon and offers them to whomever he sees, squinting against a dust-laden wind blowing across the camp. Want a sandwich? he says in a nasal tone. Helen watches him. They were both homeless when they met in 2020 outside the BottleDrop, a recycling center frequented by homeless people on Rogue River Highway, across the street from where they live at a Pentecostal church, the Bethel Christian Center. The BottleDrop processes only 350 aluminum cans or bottles from any one person per day. That afternoon, Justin had many more than that. He recycled what he was allowed and then asked Helen to redeem the rest. When she came out, she handed him his money and they began to hang out.

She feels proud of him today. Normally, he doesn't like to leave their room. Helen can't imagine being in his head and dealing with whatever crazy thoughts are there. When they were homeless together, Justin would just walk and never stop until the soles of his shoes wore off, his feet bloody. He heard voices and strange sounds, saw faces he thought were ghosts. The meds he takes now have reduced the hallucinations but they knock him out and increase his appetite. He weighs more than 200 pounds. His lethargy drives her to distraction. She works cleaning houses and barely makes enough to support herself. She can't continue providing for him and his cousin, thirty-four-year-old Jessica, who lives with them and their two dogs. Jessica doesn't work, but she helps around the church and sometimes goes out with Helen to clean houses.

A woman shouts Helen's name. Hi, hon, Helen yells back in a

scratchy, sandpaper voice. She has a determined stride despite her bad knees. The wind tosses her thick brown hair. Her eyes sweep the camp. She notices the wire fence surrounding it. Only one way in. Isn't that a fire hazard? she wonders. A lone police camera atop a pole surveys everything beneath it. Sun-bleached tents pitched on dead grass and stony ground rise above a turmoil of blankets, empty plastic water bottles, buckets, crates, bicycles, plastic bags, and whining puppies—the chaos of untethered lives holding onto scraps. Bits of burnt aluminum from fentanyl users. A dog nicknamed Fenty licks a scrap. A tall, lean man carefully rakes the ground outside his tent, a task he once might have taken for granted in the yard of a house he owned.

Helen notices that most of the tents stand against the fence. She gets that. A lot of these people have been in prison. They don't want to be exposed and have someone walk up behind them. The fence covers their back. When she lived on the street she knew whom to be with, whom to trust, absolutely. Word of mouth. She knew. She approaches a man wearing a dusty pair of blue jeans slung low on his hips. No shirt, a patchwork of beard along his jaw and chin. Lean, deeply tanned, ribs showing. His fingers a roadmap of tobacco stains.

Are you guys hungry? I got sack lunches, Helen tells him. Ham and cheese.

Of course, thank you.

You're very welcome. Got some plums here.

Heat hasn't changed.

Supposed to cool off tomorrow, Helen says.

You know what we're calling this place?

What?

The JCC. The J Street Concentration Camp.

Helen smirks. One of the wagon tires sinks into a hole and she jerks it forward. She wonders where she would pitch a tent here. By the fence like everyone else. She never wants to find out, but after this morning who knows? A blank slate of a man—a big dude with short hair and glasses—blew a hole in her day. He spoke to her in a steady, reedy voice that revealed nothing more than the words coming out of his mouth, none of them good. Told her that she, Justin, and Jessica had to leave the church where they have worked as live-in caretakers for almost three years, and find other accommodations. The man, an overseer with the Pentecostal Church of God headquarters in Drain, Oregon, more than an hour north of Grants Pass, said church bylaws do not allow anyone other than the pastor to live on the property. The pastor, Thomas Moore, had made an error allowing them to stay, the man said. A hint of annoyance crept into his voice. Before he left, he told Helen to clear out an old stove and assorted plastic containers outside her room that Pastor Moore himself had asked her to put out for garbage pickup.

Helen watched the man drive off. She always understood that she, Justin, and Jessica couldn't live in the church forever. Sooner or later she knew they'd have to leave, especially after Pastor Moore left to live with his new wife in her house fifty miles outside of town. They had met at the church earlier that summer. She sings in the choir. Neither one youngsters. Pastor Moore is seventy-three years old and his new wife is close to that. A widow, and then she met him. Married quick aware that at their age they had nothing to gain by waiting. Grinning and laughing all the time now like kids. A little too preoccupied, Helen imagines, to worry about her, Justin, and Jessica.

She doesn't know what to do. Jessica has no one but a bunch of ex-boyfriends worth no more than the air they breathe. Justin has three daughters; one of them lives in an apartment near the church. One thousand dollars a month for a one-bedroom

apartment. Her husband works, and she has a part time job. Car payments. Electricity and gas. It's hard. They earn too much to receive food stamps but not enough to get by. They rely on the food bank. Maybe they'd take Justin in. Grants Pass has been home since Helen was a child but she can sense a change, and it sure feels like the city and now even the churches want the homeless out.

Situated in Josephine County in southern Oregon, Grants Pass is an eclectic mix of flag-waving conservatives and Black Lives Matter lawn-sign liberals. The lumber industry collapsed in the 1980s, and Grants Pass turned itself into a tourist destination for backpackers, anglers, and boating enthusiasts drawn to the Rogue River, a 215-mile waterway that cuts through town and is known for its salmon runs, whitewater rafting, and rugged scenery. Antique stores, coffee shops, fashionable clothing outlets, and trendy restaurants occupy refurbished brick buildings in the eighteen square blocks of the historic downtown.

Prosperity has come at a cost. According to Oregon Housing & Community Services, nearly twenty-nine percent of renters in Grants Pass spend over half of their income on housing, a situation classified as "severely rent-burdened." A lack of affordable housing has contributed to the town's homeless population, estimated to be about six hundred souls.

The relationship between Grants Pass and homeless people has seldom been better than strained. For years, residents complained of people sleeping on the street and, more recently, in the town's seven parks. The drug addicted, in particular, intimidated families and made them feel unsafe in the parks. Compounding the problem, the city had no homeless shelter other than one faith-based program that prohibited nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs. In response to residents' concerns, the City Council passed ordinances prohibiting people from sleeping outside in public using a blanket, pillow, or even a sheet of cardboard. The fine for a first

offense was \$295, which increased to \$537.60 if not paid on time. Repeat violations could result in penalties of up to \$1,200 and thirty days in jail. Other sanctions included temporarily banning repeat offenders from the parks and a maximum of thirty days in jail for further violations.

In 2018, a lawyer representing a group of homeless people sued the city, asserting that the ordinances criminalized homelessness. A federal judge found in favor of the plaintiffs, in part because the city had no shelter. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, relying on its ruling in an Idaho case from 2018 that held that “the Eighth Amendment prohibits the imposition of criminal penalties for sitting, sleeping, or lying outside on public property for homeless individuals who cannot obtain shelter.” It affirmed part of the trial judge’s ruling and remanded the case. The city then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. In June 2024, the justices reversed the lower courts. In a 6-3 decision divided along ideological lines, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote that the Eighth Amendment “serves many important functions, but it does not authorize federal judges” to “dictate this nation’s homelessness policy.”

Two months after that ruling, the Grants Pass City Council established two fenced sites for homeless people: a half-acre lot downtown near the police station and a one-acre parcel on J Street in an industrial section of the city slated for a water treatment plant. At first, the homeless were only allowed to stay at either camp for three days at a time but eventually that was extended to one week. Now the homeless rotate between the two camps every seven days for no stated reason other than to remind them, as if they needed reminding, that nothing permanent exists in their lives.

Neither site provides social services or any kind of supervision or support staff for the homeless residents, most of whom suffer from drug addiction, mental and physical disabilities, and other problems. If a homeless person doesn’t

have a tent, they do without shelter.

Water? a man asks Helen.

She shakes her head.

I wish I had water. Grab some plums. They have water in them.

Thank you.

Helen hears the sound of unzipping tent flaps and sees tousled heads of hair emerge above worn, lined faces. Foam trays and cups being brushed aside. Eyes squinting in the bright light. Hands hauling out shoes from beneath heaps of dirty clothes. Dogs raising their heads, barking. Men and women stumbling past. Throats dry, fingers caressing crushed cigarettes to eke out one more puff. The sound of a porta potty door slamming shut. More dogs barking. Coughing, clearing of throats. Beyond the camp, a freeway emerges from a thinning haze, the swell of traffic, the moan of engines at rush hour. Angry words filled with condemnations issue forth through open car windows, get swept up in the backdraft, and descend faintly but fiercely: Find a fucking job!

Helen cocks her head, shrugs off their damning, pulls her wagon. A woman fusses among the tumult of discarded plastic bottles behind her tent, for what she can't say. Something, she mutters. Helen offers her a sack lunch. The woman looks at her, the paper bag suspended between them like an offering, and starts to cry. Helen sets the bag down and holds her.

I know honey, she says. We'll figure it out.

The woman sniffs, holds the sack against her chest. Helen walks on. The wagon wobbles on the uneven ground past tents and listing wheelchairs. She offers an elderly man a sandwich. He swipes at strands of thinning hair plastered against his forehead

If we tie our tents to the fence we're in violation, he says.

Violation of what?

The rules, I guess. We'll get cited. Can't have anything attached to or on the fence.

Take some plums, sweetheart.

Helen moves on to the next tent and the next and the next, emptying the wagon. Justin walks up to her and takes the few remaining plums and offers them to anyone who catches his eye.

What do you have left? a man asks Helen.

Nothing. Justin is taking plums around.

I don't know him.

Helen points in Justin's direction.

There's me, my girlfriend, and two kids, and I only got two sack lunches.

I'm sorry.

We stayed in the parks. My question is: Who would want kids here in this place?

There is no shade, no water, no nothing.

Yeah, Helen says. No tables to sit down at. Not enough bathrooms for all these people.

The man shakes his head. Justin walks over and offers him two plums. After the man takes them, Justin turns his palms up.

I have nothing more, he tells Helen.

Brock

Brock Spurgeon parks his green Jeep near the entrance to the J

Street Camp, shuts off the ignition, and steps out. Lean, muscular. Tile contractor. Owns his own business. His gray hair tied back in a short ponytail. Trim goatee. Straight posture. He considers the homeless people hanging out in cars outside the entrance. Men and women in the front and back seats amid a jumble of clothes. Smoking, watching Brock. He walks through the gate glancing down at the rock-strewn ground. He passes two porta potties. Clothes dry on the fence in violation of camp rules. The woman who wept in Helen's arms sorts through pants outside her tent. She talks as people walk around her, still conversing with herself but open for anyone to join in. A black-and-white dog with curly hair lies beside her panting. With every breath its ribs are visible. Tongue lolling, it observes Brock.

The trash, the needles, the pipes, the woman says. I'm a fenty but I clean up after myself. If my dog swallows one of those needles I'm going to kill somebody. I'll go to prison over my dog dying.

She gives Brock a harried look, fingers her pants like she is searching for something.

This one kid—he's gone now—he would just drop his needles.

One of the reasons I'm here. I'm looking for my son, Brock says.

Name?

Jack. Jack Spurgeon.

She shakes her head.

No, I have not seen Jack. I have not. Does he look like you?

Ah, maybe a little bit.

She faces Brock and studies his face.

I think I may have seen him. I didn't know his name but I may have seen him once or twice.

They call him Drifter, Brock says. He's thirty-nine.

Drifter, OK, I gotcha.

He's got a girlfriend, so he has a place. If they're not fighting, he's with her.

Gotcha.

Brock has always seen homeless people in Grants Pass but he remembers seeing many more of them starting in 2021. He used to walk through the parks and find tinfoil and needles all over the ground. The same shit he'd find in Jack's room. In or out of the house, Brock's life was surrounded by this crap. He started collecting what he found in large, black trash bags because no one believed him. Needles just lying in the grass. City workers cleaned the parks but when Brock followed trails down to the Rogue River or walked under bridges—places a little kid might want to explore—he'd find drug paraphernalia everywhere. He spoke at City Council meetings but didn't think anyone listened even when he showed them his bag of discarded drug gear. He got on Facebook and expressed his concerns. Brock bought a small body camera, positioned it above his left ear and walked through the parks among homeless people. Hey, how's it going? he'd say, and take footage of drug use. He posted the videos on social media. Got a lot of traction. Brock developed a following that evolved into Park Watch, a volunteer group that began cleaning and patrolling the parks every Sunday. Park Watch also held rallies. Its members waved signs, Take Back Our Parks. Drivers honked, signaling their support. Now that the parks have been cleared, Brock thinks the city needs to distinguish the drug addicts from the homeless people who have problems unrelated to addiction. Got to help both groups but in two different ways. Addicts need treatment. The other homeless need a place to live and a job.

He hopes this woman with the dog gets the assistance she needs.

Even though we're in such close quarters and we can watch our stuff, people aren't leaving their tents because people are so used to having to stay with their stuff so it doesn't get stolen, she says. And that's the problem now. People are in that rut of sitting with their things and not leaving to take care of business.

My son won't put a Coke down in our house when he comes by even if he's falling asleep.

Afraid someone will take it?

Yeah, Brock says. That's why he sometimes sleeps standing up.

I don't sleep a lot. I'm afraid someone will take my dog.

He looks at her kneeling on the ground surrounded by the ruin of her life.

Take care, he tells her.

He walks deeper into the camp. The sun bears down. He shakes his head at the lack of shade and no water. That's crazy. The town has been so pissed off for so long about the homeless that they don't want to give them anything. Why have anything for these people? Camps with shade and water? Hell, why don't we just get them out of town?

You got to realize, Brock tells them, that many of the people who were in the parks are not bad people. They have mental health problems; some of them are veterans. How do you say they don't deserve shade, water, and a place to stay? Brock once wanted people out of the parks just like most everyone else, but he doesn't hate them. He feels he has flipped to the other side and become an advocate for the homeless. He's like, Cool your jets, man. We got to treat people the way we want to be treated. Brock has a motto: Beat the drug, love the user.

He doubts Jack would stay at J Street. Maybe come by to see if anyone's dealing but not stay. Jack has been doing drugs for almost twenty years. Brock hasn't spoken to him in at least five months. They go through cycles. Brock and his wife try to help him. Then they feel they're enabling him and pull back, and Jack gets mad and they stop talking to one another. But Brock knows Jack is out here. Somewhere.

A woman walks past Brock, gives him a hard look.

Oh, it's you. Bully time, she says.

He doesn't recognize her but assumes she has seen him in one of the parks. Perhaps he caught her on his camera or she saw him picking up trash and jotting down observations in his notebook. He chuckles, dismissing the comment. He has been called worse, a lot worse. He knows Park Watch makes addicts feel bad, embarrassed. He has no problem with that. They were in a public park doing drugs. Some people have accused Park Watch of being a vigilante group. Brock wrote a mission statement and gave it to the police chief to review. He had no problem with it. The chief introduced him to nonprofit groups that assisted the homeless. Brock installed a tile floor for one organization. He's not against anyone. He and his wife have taken in many homeless people over the years; the average stay is about five months. Help them find a job and a place and move on. At one time they had a family of five. They were old friends and had moved to Grants Pass without a place to stay.

Brock wants to help people, but he also wants drugs off the street. He believes the two are not mutually exclusive. He believes unemployment and drugs drive people into homelessness and not necessarily in that order. He tells people, My son is homeless. He lives on the streets. But in a strict sense, he's not homeless. He can return home anytime if he enters a drug program. He'd have a room and a full-time job with me tomorrow if he wanted it. Brock has given him work before. On paydays,

Brock would give Jack fifty bucks and hold the rest so he wouldn't blow it. But he always needed money. He could never wait two weeks for his check. Brock worried that if he paid him in full he'd never see him again. A contractor caught Jack nodding out one day. I can't have him here, he told Brock.

Brock has allowed Jack back home a few times since he moved out at nineteen, but he always screws up. Police have removed him on several occasions because he got crazy. Did too many drugs, stayed up too many nights, lost his mind. Turned his room into a drug den. He had fifty bags full of garbage. Brock asked him, Why don't you throw this crap away? There might be something good in them, Dad. Or, I lost something and it might be in one of the bags. But he was too messed up to sort through them. After he kicked Jack out, Brock cleaned his room in half an hour and found nothing worth keeping.

He sees guys walking around like zombies and wonders how many other fathers and mothers suffer like him and his wife. How many people on the street would have a home if they stopped using? Parents contact him through Facebook and ask him to look for their kids. They think they might be in Grants Pass. They send him photos of smiling, good-looking kids—images from another time. Please, let us know. He found one young woman. Her parents were thrilled she was alive. He knows that feeling.

Jack doesn't want to quit using drugs or can't. Get some rehab, Brock tells him. Ain't going to happen, Dad. Fentanyl, meth, alcohol, Jack uses all of it. Benzodiazepine, an antidepressant, affected him worse than anything else he tried. Just wiped him out. Brock can't deal with him when uses that.

Brocks wipes his forehead. The din of heavy machinery from Copeland Sand & Gravel, a paving company next door, interrupts the noise of freeway traffic, and a man from R&M Lumber Sales across the street shouts at someone driving into the

business's lot, their possessions piled on the car's roof, You can't park here! A Home Depot stands on a hill above the camp and customers amble in and out oblivious of the men and women below. Mountains covered with fir trees rise behind it like a painting on a postcard. Brock watches a man kneeling outside an orange tent sorting through a shoulder pack. He recognizes him as someone who has attended City Council meetings. During public comments, this man urged the council members to visit the camps and meet the people staying there to understand their problems. Brock approaches him.

Good morning, Brock says. I've seen you at City Hall.

The man glances at him.

Get a job! someone yells from the freeway.

The man turns in the direction of the shout and then turns back to Brock.

We deal with that all day long, the man says. People screaming obscenities.

He stands and brushes his hands against his red plaid shirt and blue jeans. He has a goatee tied into a braid. His hair falls to his shoulders.

My son is out here, Brock says. They call him Drifter. And he told me once how much it hurts, the insults. Junkie and other names.

More shouting from the freeway, the words indistinguishable.

Water off a duck's back, the man says. Takes a toll on some folks. I've had a bunch of death threats. So that's why I don't share my name. I go by a street name, Lion Heart.

Brock nods. Dogs start barking and two people scream at them to shut up. Men and women sitting outside their tents follow the commotion.

At the beginning, Brock says, everyone was pissed off. Now that we've cleared the parks, we should see how we can help. We can't disappear people. Drugs get in you, it's like a little devil in their head. It tells them they don't need rehab. My son, the only time he comes close to stopping is when he's been in jail one month to three months.

Lion Heart doesn't comment. Brock hopes Jack will get hauled into jail again. He becomes a different person then. Coherent. Gets released and tries to stay straight. Brock can work him eight hours a day but not twenty-four hours. When Jack gets time on his hands, that's it.

There's nothing to distract my son after work, Brock says. I'm a tile contractor.

Cool, Lion Heart says, I worked in the trades. A lot of years.

Keeps me out of trouble, Brock says. I know the allure. I did drugs.

I didn't, Lion Heart says. I had cancer for ten years. Chemo.

Better now?

Still living with it.

Brock looks at the haggard faces peering at him and Lion Heart from nearby tents. As a boy, Jack hung out with about half a dozen kids who experimented with OxyContin. They got torn up on it and went straight to heroin when the original Oxy formulation was taken off the market. High school friends. All of them went off the rails.

They came out of the shadows when they came to the parks. Creepy people and nice people. Addicts and nonaddicts. People like my son, he's choosing this life. I have a full-time job for him and a home if he goes to rehab.

Lion Heart looks at the ground, tugs at his goatee. He offers

Brock an enigmatic smile.

Begs the question doesn't it? he says. Choosing. Delve deep enough, you might find something that happened.

Helen

Helen and Justin leave the J Street Camp in her battered, blue Toyota Corolla. Pastor Moore gave it to her when they moved into the church in 2021. She owned a Mitsubishi Eclipse at the time, small as a Smart car that a former employer had given to her. It had no functioning brakes other than the handbrake. When she and Justin were homeless, Pastor Moore let her park at the church because the registration had expired, and Helen worried the car would get towed if she left it on the street. You can't be driving that, Pastor Moore told her after he saw its condition. He insisted she take the Corolla. He preferred driving his pickup and didn't need it. The Corolla wasn't in much better shape than the Eclipse, but the brakes worked.

Helen and Justin camped behind the church with half a dozen other homeless people Pastor Moore had allowed to stay on the property. Garbage began to accumulate: discarded cans, bottles, fast-food cartons, and soiled clothes. Helen and Justin took it upon themselves to clean it up. They carted five loads of trash to the dump. Tired of the mess, Pastor Moore asked everyone but Helen and Justin to leave. He offered them the use of a small room in back of the church in exchange for maintaining the property. He didn't object when Jessica moved in. The cramped quarters barely contain the three of them and the dogs. Helen and Justin share a bed; Jessica sleeps on a cot by the door among a loosely organized pile of clothes, coats, shoulder packs, fans, sleeping bags, and bathroom supplies.

When Helen was homeless she acquired what people discarded: shirts, sweaters, shoes. Each little thing had its uses. If

not for her, for someone else she knew. Even though she has a place to stay and enough clothes, she has trouble restraining herself from picking up odds and ends. Can I use this? Yeah, yeah, I can use it and at the same time she thinks, No, no, I don't need it. Old habits, survival instincts, Helen doesn't know the reason but she continues to collect stuff.

Justin

As a boy, Justin suffered a lot of head injuries, the first one when he was four years old. He ran out of a mobile home through a door where there were no steps and smacked his head on the concrete. His mishaps didn't stop him from playing sports. Baseball, wrestling, football. Justin could do them all. He especially loved baseball. He was a left-handed pitcher, a southpaw, but then his mind snapped. At sixteen he suffered a panic attack at a carnival. He saw dragons rising out of the sky and freaked out. Doctors diagnosed him with agoraphobia, schizophrenia, bipolar and paranoid personality disorders. Medications helped but often left him feeling apathetic and somnolent.

He dropped out of school and didn't do anything for about two years until he met a girl and got her pregnant. He earned his GED and attended Rogue Community College but didn't graduate. He drank, used meth, and sold pot. He split up with his girlfriend, started seeing another woman and got married. They had two daughters but they divorced over his drug use. His family didn't tolerate it either, and he began couch surfing from party house to party house. He was in and out of jail for drugs and parole violations. After he met Helen, he joined her on Devil's Slide, a mountain on the outskirts of town above G Street. They shared a two-room tent. No one messed with them. Justin maintained the camp. He still used drugs but not as much. He built an outhouse, an accomplishment he still takes pride in. He had purpose on the mountain; there was always

something to do. He doesn't have purpose now. Maybe it's the meds. He prefers to be left alone.

He has considered applying for a job at a gas station. Self-service gas pumps are not universal in Oregon. Pumping gas isn't hard and he wouldn't have to talk to people much. He should receive disability but he can't figure out the paperwork. Even his doctor says he's eligible. Justin thinks he should help him. He knows he gets on Helen's nerves and feels bad about it. His brain tells him to help her around the church, but his body doesn't respond. He lies on their bed like a turtle on its back with no desire to get up. He understands a man told Helen they have to move. He knows he has to do something.

Helen

Before they began staying at the church, Helen and Justin lived in Morrison Park, a few blocks away by some tennis courts. A city ordinance allowed camping in one spot for up to seventy-two hours in public spaces. Violators were ticketed. Helen figures she has close to \$5,000 in fines. She has received letters threatening her with jail if she doesn't pay. No way she can come up with that kind of money. She earns about \$800 a month cleaning houses. Her pay varies from week to week depending on the number of houses she cleans. One elderly woman, Miss Sandy, pays her fifty dollars for two hours of work every other week. She has another client who pays her about \$120 for four hours of work twice a week. This client owns a big house, more like a farm, really, that's home to five German shepherds, two alpacas, five tortoises, five chickens, and one sheep. It amazes Helen how people spend their money, but the woman always has work. Yeah, come over, Helen, she'll say. I got this, this and this to be done. Helen enjoys cleaning. She's good at it. Doesn't pay much but she doesn't need much living at the church. She was never one of

those nine-to-five people, and she doesn't want to be an average person doing an average job that they hate. Not a burger flipper, for sure. She couldn't even work for her mother, an assistant manager at a Wendy's restaurant back in the day. Helen took orders at the drive-through window but she didn't have the temperament for rude people, and when someone gave her grief she returned it in kind. Her mother fired her.

That's it, Helen, she said. Go home.

Helen wants her own house. Maybe when Grants Pass builds affordable housing. Yeah, right. She can dream. Pastor Moore will vouch for her with the church hierarchy, she feels sure. Maybe they'll change their minds and let her stay. Pastor Moore loves her cooking. She caught him in the kitchen one night eating black-eyed peas and Vienna sausages from a frying pan and still hasn't gotten over the shock. Oh my God, that's not going to happen, she said. You gotta eat better'n that. She made him a camp breakfast and now he wants it all the time. Nothing complicated: Bacon or sausage mixed with onions, tomatoes, and potatoes. Fry it all up in a cast iron pan, crack two or three eggs on top of it and mix. Her friend, Miss Colleen, used to make it every Fourth of July. They've known each other for years. Helen attended the same school as Jesse Firestone, the older of Miss Colleen's two sons. She was a dietary cook at an old folks home for the longest time and can be a real kick in the pants. Helen first met her when she was hanging out with Jesse and his friends after school. Don't call me mom, aunt, or grandma because you're not kin, she told Helen. OK, Miss Colleen, Helen said, and to this day she has never called her anything else.

Miss Colleen's husband, Howard, worked as a logger. Helen would help him clean around the house after work. He had a heart attack about three years back. Helen found him slumped in his recliner, car keys in hand, holding the phone, a 911 operator on the other end, but he couldn't talk. Helen shouted, He needs an ambulance. Howard rolled out of the chair

to the floor. Helen started CPR, then watched the light go out of his eyes. An ambulance arrived forty-five minutes after he died.

If she must move, Helen knows Miss Colleen would help her. She stayed with her before when she needed a break from the streets. Miss Colleen has her own life, and Helen doesn't want to impose more than she already has. But what about Justin and Jessica? Where would they live?

Laura

Laura parks outside the gate of the J Street Camp and reaches for her cane. She has lived in her 2012 Subaru in Riverside Park in the heart of the city since her husband, Michael, died in 2021 of a pulmonary embolism. They met over a pool game. Laura can play some pool.

As long as she remains in her Subaru and doesn't camp, the police don't bother her. She parks near a boat ramp. It's hot enough today that she might float on the river in an inner tube. Hate to do it alone. Last time she floated, she stayed in the water until eight o'clock at night. Started at Hog Creek and got out before she reached Cove Creek. Rough water after that. Class II, III rapids.

A disorganized mass of clothes and boxes fills her vehicle, cartons of photos and old jewelry she collected over the years too. Whatever memories she has left from living in a house are buried somewhere in the backseat.

She gets out of the Subaru. Her knees ache. She wears a sweat-stained floor-length, tan dress. Her hair is pulled back in an uneven ponytail. Sandals on her swollen feet. She leans heavily on the cane, shuffles forward, moving inches at a time. The gravel does not make for easy walking. Volunteers with the Mobile Integrative Navigation Team, a nonprofit that

assists the homeless, have collected in the center of the camp to serve coffee and scrambled eggs. Boxes of fruit and bread sit on the tailgate of a pickup for people to sort through.

Hi Laura, says a woman serving coffee and juice.

I know you, Laura says. Eileen?

Right. How's everything?

OK.

Yeah?

Up and down on the normal homeless rollercoaster.

What can I get you?

Coffee and a little bit of juice.

Okey dokey.

Laura points to a can of V8 juice and Eileen gives it to her with a cup of coffee. The other night Laura had wondered, What can I do for dinner? She had bruschetta from the food bank. She drove to Safeway and got one bell pepper, one onion, one tomato, and a packet of provolone cheese. She diced and sautéed the onions and peppers with a big chunk of provolone cheese and cooked it all up until it was crispy. Took hoagy rolls and put some butter and Italian seasoning and parmesan cheese and grilled them on a Coleman stove. Put some canned meat over that. Not supposed to cook outside. One girl blew up her tent with propane. Laura was terrified she might get caught, but it was a good meal.

She steps away from the coffee line for the egg line. She looks over the heads of the men and women, listens to the noise coming off the freeway. Grants Pass has changed dramatically since she was a child. It was much more rural

then. She couldn't ride her bicycle on her family's gravel driveway. Couldn't roller skate or use a skateboard except on the road because there were no sidewalks where she lived.

She was born in Sonoma, California, to parents who were Jehovah's Witnesses. Two families they knew moved to Grants Pass when she was a toddler. One night her father came home and said to her mother, Come on Barbara, get the kids, we're going for a drive. Dick, where are we going? her mother asked. He didn't answer, or at least Laura didn't hear him. They got in the car and drove until dark. They stopped at a McDonald's for dinner and continued driving. More than five hours later they arrived in Grants Pass and stayed with one of the families that had moved before them. They remained for the weekend, just long for her parents to find a house, and then returned to Sonoma. They sold their home and settled in Grants Pass. Her father started a roofing business. When jobs became scarce he would return to California and work with his brother at Cascade Natural Gas Company, a job he had held before.

Laura used to think she had a terrible life. Because of her parents' religious beliefs, they did not celebrate birthdays or most holidays. Oh, if only her life now was so simple that those things were her only disappointments. She and Michael had been married almost twenty-eight years. He could be pretty self-involved. He was a carpenter and obsessed about work. He fixated on his truck and his tools. Laura should have died before him. Overweight, a smoker, high blood pressure, diabetes. Michael was healthy. She had been a stay-at-home mom, taking care of the three children, two of whom had different fathers from previous relationships. The kids grew up, moved out, and the plan had been for Laura and Michael to focus on themselves. Their marriage was off-and-on rocky like any couple after decades of being together, but nobody lives with someone as long as she lived with Michael and not remain in love with them in some way. They never fought, raised their voices or disagreed in the first years of their marriage but

drugs got in the way. Michael used meth and liked to drink. He also gambled. Laura gambled too, playing pool, and they both lost money.

Despite their problems she assumed they'd grow old and sit on the porch and watch the cars go by. She never thought he'd die and she would need to support herself. Laura has looked for work but suffers from anxiety and depression and a host of health issues. When doctors diagnosed her with diabetes, they took her off the anti-inflammatory drugs she used to dull the pain in her knees. She spent two months in a hospital with pneumonia and upper GI problems. When a potential employer sees her with a cane or a walker, they question her abilities. Can you sweep this facility, mop the floor? She knows little about computers and doesn't type. Makes finding a job tough.

Would you like scrambled eggs? a woman asks Laura.

Yes, please.

Salsa on the eggs?

Yes, please.

Good idea to bring salsa, a man says behind her. Sometimes she has avocado.

I know, Laura says and smiles. Once I get money, I'll get ice and an ice chest. Keep what I don't finish covered with foil and ice. I buy ice every day when I can.

That sounds right, the man says.

The woman fills a clear plastic cup with scrambled eggs, tops it off with salsa, and gives it to Laura. She stuffs a plastic bag with two loaves of bread, fresh peaches, and a box of cereal. Laura reaches for that with her free hand. She holds the cup of eggs in her other hand and begins the long, slow shuffle back to her car, leaning on her cane, the bag dangling at her side, bouncing off her left leg as she moves.

After Michael died, Laura had no place to live. The house they shared belonged to his grandmother. She had left the house to his brother, Steven, when she died. As long as Michael was alive, Steven never laid claim to the house. He was unemployed and Michael provided for him. But when Michael died, Steven told Laura to pack her things and move out. Her parents wanted nothing to do with her because she smoked and gambled. She found refuge in her car.

Her three grown children know she lives on the street. Jeez, mom, her oldest daughter told her, I've been down and out too. Get over it. Just find a job. That stung. She ran into a friend of Michael's the other day, Merl. They had worked together. Merl married and divorced. Now he's dating his ex-wife again. Go figure. After Michael died, Merl told Laura, If you need anything just call. She thinks he doesn't understand her circumstances, or if he does he has chosen not to ask questions. Friends treat her like a leper. She avoids people she once knew.

Laura reaches her car and leans on the hood to catch her breath. Her knees pulse with pain. She opens the door and backs in plopping down in the driver's seat. Swings one leg in and then the other. She places the cup of eggs on the dashboard and hefts the bag onto the littered passenger seat. As she closes the door, she notices a skinny young woman in a torn yellow blouse and blue jeans, her dirty blond hair sprouting off her head like a fern.

Hi Baby Girl, How are you? How's your mom?

Baby Girl turns, scrutinizes Laura and then smiles, exposing a row of fragmented teeth.

Hey, Momma Bear. I haven't talked to her.

Young people call Laura by the nickname Momma Bear. She provides for them. She gives them food and offers bandages for their cuts and scrapes. She carries Narcan in case one of them

OD's.

Well, if you do see her, say I said hello.

Laura used to babysit Baby Girl. Laura had attended school with Baby Girl's mother, who had mental health problems that weren't recognized when Laura knew her. Bipolar, schizophrenia, something like that. Laura isn't entirely sure, just remembers her being a little off. And then about twelve months ago, maybe longer, she ran into Baby Girl. Addicted to fentanyl. Used to be three times her current size. Lost a baby, Laura isn't sure when. Just thirty-four years old. Has mental health issues like her mother, like ninety-nine percent of the people out here. Like herself.

Are you staying here? Laura asks.

I don't stay here, fuck that, Baby Girl says. Things have to change in this town. It's a prison here.

A police cruiser passes them and parks outside the camp.

There's a cop, Laura says. I can't have him see me behind the wheel. My driver's license expired. I have to take the test again.

Baby Girl watches the cop get out of his vehicle and walk into the camp.

I got to go, Baby Girl says.

OK, honey. Me too.

Laura starts the car. She wants to live on her own again. She wants a kitchen and a bathroom and a bedroom. Not being able to cook, not having responsibility and pride in her own home drives her to distraction. Too reliant on strangers for everything. Being homeless isn't living on your own.



Part Two

Helen

Helen parks at the church. Shadows extend down the walls as the day settles into afternoon. A placard above the front door reads, Expect a Miracle. She opens a gate, drives through, stops and closes the gate. Justin gets out and goes to their room. Helen walks to the kitchen to see what she has to make pizza for dinner. Justin complains about his weight and blames her for cooking too much fattening food. Well, don't eat it, she tells him.

She checks the refrigerator. Pork sausage, mushrooms. Good pizza toppings. She pours a glass of water and looks out the window. Hot as it is doesn't make her forget winter will be along soon. When it snows, the mountains will turn white as

sheets. Wait five minutes, and the snow will become rain. No telling how long winter will last. She has seen it snow in July. Crazy weather.

The snow can be so wet and heavy it collapses tents. Very, very cold, a penetrating cold, but when she was homeless Helen figured out a way to stay warm. Take a roll of toilet paper, soak it with rubbing alcohol, set it in a coffee can, light it, and it's a heater. Cops caught on and that too became illegal. Anyone found burning anything received a ticket.

She learned to survive as a child. She was born in Granada Hills, California, and grew up with two siblings, an older sister, Dawn, and a younger brother, John. Dawn had guts. Or maybe just a mind of her own. She'd sneak out of the house, and didn't care about the consequences—and there were consequences. Their father didn't think anything of smacking them around if they got out of line. Helen ran into Dawn three weeks ago. She had an opportunity to stay at the church but she was on fentanyl and not interested.

Their mother supported the family. She worked, fed them, kept money coming in, and made sure they had what was necessary. Her father held jobs here and there as kind of a shade tree mechanic. He took work when it came to him but didn't break a sweat looking for it. He didn't like to pay rent and he would pack his family up before the landlord came to collect. Helen always knew it was moving time when her father backed the station wagon up to the front door. Time to go. He handled the stereo and his collection of Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and Waylon Jennings albums, in addition to at least 500 other records. Her mother stuffed bags with clothes.

Both parents drank. A kid's birthday party provided an opportunity for the grownups to get drunk and fight. A birthday cake, balloons, and a knock-down-drag-out. Helen, Dawn, John, and their friends would flee to the bedroom. One time her father fell against the door and it collapsed on top

of them. The next morning, they crept out to survey the damage. Will today be like yesterday? they wondered. They cleaned up broken glass and chairs and ignored the bruised faces of their parents.

One morning after a night of drinking, Helen's mother and father picked up where they had left off and laid into each other with all the hungover fury they could summon. Her father stormed outside to the car, swiping glasses off of a table and against a wall on his way out. Shards of glass struck Helen's mother. When she realized she was bleeding, she started screaming. Helen's father heard her and got out of the car without applying the parking brake. The car rolled against the house breaking the porch. That was in Van Nuys, California.

Helen never roused her parents after they passed out, but she broke up their fights. They'd be thick in the middle of it, and she had to decide which parent to block, pissing them off even more. Who's side are you on? Oh, you're daddy's little girl? Oh, you're your momma's girl? Fine, you go with your momma. Fine, you go with your daddy. Helen didn't want to go with either one of them. She didn't want to go anywhere. She just wanted them to stop fighting.

She learned that "I don't know" was not an acceptable answer to a question. It resulted in a slap to the mouth. Why didn't you put the dishes away? I don't know. Slap. Where're my shoes? I don't know. Slap. What did you say? I don't know. Slap.

When Helen was four, they left California for good and headed north to Grants Pass where Helen's mother had family. Only 14,000 people lived there in those days. Friendly. No one locked their doors. Helen liked to ride her bike to Rogue Community College and wander around the campus. Her father and mother told her not to go that far but she didn't listen. One night, her father took her bike and threw it on the roof. When she really pissed him off, he'd grab by her hair.

The first time she slept with a boy, Helen got pregnant. Her sweet sixteen birthday party was a baby shower. She gave birth to a son, Michael. Her father at the time had been busted for burglary and other charges and sentenced to ten years in prison. After his conviction, the family lost their rental and Helen lived with her mother in a trailer on Redwood Highway. In 1997, her mother was struck by a car walking home from a bar, the Pine Tree Tavern, and died. Helen was twenty-three. Her world crashed. The loss of her mother unmoored her. She had been the foundation of the family. Helen blamed her death on her father. Had he been home instead of in prison, she thought, her mother never would have gone out that night.

Helen grieved. She started drinking and got into meth. She didn't have a job and could not afford the trailer. She gave up custody of Michael to his father and bounced from couch to couch. She and a boyfriend eventually quit Grants Pass for Wyoming, where her father had moved to join members of his family. Helen's boyfriend drove trucks for oil rigs and left her alone for days at a time. After three years, she broke up with him when he started cheating on her. Told her father she was leaving for Oregon. A few days later, she showed up on Miss Colleen's porch.

The bottle became her best friend. Booze put her in the hospital when she began vomiting blood. She was hospitalized a second time in 2016 when she broke her right foot riding a bicycle and developed an infection. Her boyfriend at the time never visited her. You've left me with just the clothes on my back, she told him over the phone. Well, that's a start, he said.

When the hospital discharged her, she had nowhere to go. A drug charge had put her brother in prison, and Dawn was using meth and living on the street. She offered Helen a tarp. Here you go, she said. There's a tree. Helen had no idea what to do. She put the tarp on the ground and rolled up in it like a burrito and lived under that tree for a year. Food banks

provided her with meals, blankets, and other survival gear. She owned one backpack and filled it with two pairs of jeans, two sweatshirts, a lot of socks, one pair of shoes, two T-shirts, and blankets. Carried it with her wherever she went. Always stocked up on toilet paper and feminine hygiene supplies.

Jessica

Jessica knows Helen is making a pizza but she isn't hungry. Doesn't eat much, sleeps less. Doesn't sleep for crap. Most nights she walks to Morrison Park around midnight and smokes pot. She has been clean for three, maybe four months. Hates it. Hates being off meth and heroin. Drinks here and there. She has a lot of stuff in her mental closet, and it all comes out when she's not using drugs, making her sick. She has dizzy spells and blackouts. She should take meds for schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder but she won't because she can't function on them, can't move. Her brain screams, Get up! but she can't. She doesn't think they work right, but without them, without meth and heroin, without something, her memories run riot, painful stuff, all these tormenting thoughts tripping and tumbling inside her head, jabbing her brain like little thorns, and when she tries to verbalize them, the words spill out of her mouth with the speed of an auctioneer and no one understands her.

Honey, Helen always tells her, slow down.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm ...

Honey, Helen says, it's OK. Just slow down.

Jessica remembers looking for her dealer one day when she was still using. He wasn't around and she started getting sick from withdrawal. She crouched behind a dumpster, shaking. Some lady found her and took her home for the night. She had a

daughter in college and gave Jessica some of her clothes. Weren't her size but close enough, and then she drove her back to her mother's house. She and Jessica's father had split up by then and she had a boyfriend. When he saw the shape she was in, he got her a fix.

She got into drugs after the uncle of a cousin raped her—and not just once—when she was twelve. She was out with her younger sister and he threw her in the back of his car. Your mom wanted me to pick you up, he said, and he took off and left her sister behind. She told her cousin and broke down crying and he said he wouldn't mention it, but he lied and told her mother and she then told just about everybody she knew. Some members of the family, aunts and other uncles, accused her of lying. Her father wouldn't look at her. Like she had done something wrong. She ran away for the first time after that. She went out one weekend and didn't go back home. Walked to Riverside Park and slept in a tunnel slide on the children's playground. A lady came by and asked if she was OK. Jessica fibbed and said her parents knew where she was. The lady came by the next day to feed the ducks. She saw Jessica had on the same clothes as the day before and got worried and called the police. They took her home, and she ran away again. Her friends were like, Hey look out for the cops. She wasn't worried about the cops. Instead she kept her eyes peeled for a big red hippie van her cousin's uncle drove. Cops were nothing. As soon as they dropped her off, she'd walk out again.

Her mom and dad used meth, drank, and smoked pot. Jessica's baby sister cried when she found out. You're all drug addicts! she screamed. Jessica said, I know it. It wasn't all bad. Sometimes her mom would drive them to Medford, Oregon, for lunch at JJ North's Grand Buffet. Jessica stood in the backseat and pretended to surf. It was fun. Her dad had a blue 1960s-vintage Chevy lowrider pickup. He liked old cars. He died in 2012. Part of Jessica thinks he's still alive although

she understands he's dead. She knows that sounds really stupid. She isn't good at dealing with things like death. She locks away bad memories in her mental closet, smokes pot, and numbs out.

She wants a goal to strive for but nothing clicks. She has applied for jobs but no one hires her. She has cleaned houses and watched kids, but she doesn't have the phone numbers of the people she has worked for and can't provide references. Helen tries to help her. She hooked her up with an old woman who needed assistance but the lady must have weighed 300 pounds. Jessica didn't want to work for someone that big. She might fall and crack her head open and Jessica wouldn't be able to lift her, and that would be on her conscience for the rest of her life.

This evening she decides to walk to Riverside Park. There, that's a goal and something she knows she can accomplish. The park doesn't close until ten o'clock. Go to the side near the boat ramp and see who might be there. Jessica never has money but she has street friends.

She walks out of the church and into the night. To Rogue River Highway, past a general store and the BottleDrop. Homeless men stand beneath a tree, their silhouettes hunched in shadow, moths flitting above their heads, manic in the glow of streetlights. Jessica follows Parkdale Drive to the park. The expansive sky is a dome of black. She walks past a tennis court and toward a dock. A woman everyone knows as Blond Dawn stands beside a white Dodge SUV beneath trees. Jessica likes the swirl of colors on her tie-dyed T-shirt. The threads of her torn blue jeans snake against her knees.

Jessica? she says.

Hey. Cops letting you stay here?

So far.

Dawn lights a cigarette. She has been homeless off and on for

fourteen years. She grew up in San Diego but hasn't been back since 1981 when she got married. A long time. She has lived in Grants Pass since 1991. She and her now ex-husband ran a cabinet shop. Her father-in-law owned a winery in town. Between them they had two businesses up and running until her husband asked for a divorce. Dawn didn't hire an expensive attorney like he did. Her ex took everything. She got the van.

They've moved everyone out of Baker Park, Dawn says.

Yeah, I know, Jessica says. Moved everyone out of everywhere.

Dawn leans against the van and rolls her head to unknot a kink in her neck. A dog barks and her gray pit bull sits up, ears perked. Shh, she tells it. She lets out a breath. Her dog chased a lady walking a chihuahua this afternoon. Not very good public relations. She owes \$3,500 in camping violations and needs to set up a payment plan to get her driver's license back. Right now she's OK. But if the city closes parks to people living in their vehicles, she'll be on the streets looking for another place to stop for the night. More fines, maybe jail if the police stop her and see that her license is expired.

You can be in parks but not in tents, Jessica tells hers, but you have to be out of the park after hours.

They haven't run us off yet.

I heard different, Jessica says.

You heard wrong. We've been able to stay after the park closes. I didn't expect this. I'm a hard worker. I like to carry my weight. I agree we shouldn't be in the parks. A lot make a mess of it.

A lot do, Jessica agrees.

I don't think that the city should just make us move out, though. We've been here for years.

Jessica rocks on her feet. She remembers one day, high on heroin, she passed out on a street near downtown. When she woke up, Helen's sister, Dawn, and a homeless guy named Timmy were carrying her. Middle of the day. No one asked them nothing or stopped them. Carrying an unconscious woman and everybody's like, OK. Dawn lived in a four-story building decorated with murals of blue sky and smiling people. Jessica woke up in her room on a mattress on the floor. In the days that followed, Dawn helped her kick heroin cold turkey.

She hasn't seen Dawn for a while. About four months ago, she mistook Helen for Dawn one night at a 7-Eleven. They look alike but Helen is a little heavier. Helen told Jessica she was living at the church. Jessica started stopping by. After a few days, Helen asked Pastor Moore if she could stay.

Police take your stuff, Jessica tells Dawn. I've seen them sweep up everybody's things and put it in the back of a truck and when everybody gets back to camp it's like, What happened to my stuff?

Police do let you pick it up, though, Dawn says.

Have a cigarette?

No, no I don't. This is my last one.

Jessica sighs. She looks up at the stars, how they crowd the sky.

The night has teeth, she says.

What?

Nothing, just my mind, Jessica says.

Helen

Helen puts the pizza in the oven and walks to her room for a

glass of wine. She considers herself a functioning alcoholic. Just because she has a half gallon of vodka doesn't mean she has to drink it all at once. She used to do that, plus a fifth or so of something else. Now, she's OK with a glass of wine. A shot of vodka with it doesn't hurt.

One day not that long ago, Helen pulled into an Arco station just over the bridge on the way into town and saw an old man approaching her. Tall, slender, black cowboy hat, black boots, bell-bottom pants. Long gray hair. Then she recognized him: Her dad. She hadn't even known he was in town. These days they have an uneasy truce. Helen can't see the point in staying mad at him forever. He experienced pain and guilt over her mother's death just like she did. He misses her too. God made him who he is. It wasn't his choice to be a violent drunk. I'm sorry for everything, he has told her many, many times. She tries not to talk about the past. He's the only parent she has now, and she won't lose him while he still lives. He rents a trailer home but won't tell her where. She makes him uneasy, Helen thinks, because she looks so much like her mother.

She visits with him about once a month. He'll call: I'm going to Wal-Mart. Alright Dad, I'll meet you there if I have time. It works out. They'll chat in the parking lot. She got a call from him the other day. Helen. Your Aunt Judy called me. She said you were on TV. What are you doing, Helen? I was at city hall meeting advocating for the homeless, Dad.

Her son, Michael, turned out well. He lives in Portland and manages a chain grocery store. They don't talk. His father poisoned him toward her, Helen believes, and Michael wants nothing to do with her. She follows him on Facebook. His father lives in Grants Pass and Helen runs into him every once in a while, long enough for him to give her a hard time. He had been working at a fence manufacturer. She doesn't know what he does now but run his mouth. Michael is thirty-three and a father. Helen has a grandson. That makes her feel old. And she sort of is, she reminds herself. Shit, she's lucky to

have made it this far.

Mark

Mark Collier, a retired Navy pilot, is a friend of Brock Spurgeon's. They have coffee about once a month. This morning he decides to drive to the J Street Camp. He has stopped by before and was shocked by the conditions. No water, not enough porta potties. He doesn't see much coordination. People come in, try to help an individual or two, and leave.

He has lived in Grants Pass for twenty years, maybe more if he thinks about it. He was raised a Catholic and carries a lot of, if not guilt, a feeling of I-should-do-something-to-help-others-more. He's read the French existential philosopher John Paul Satre who believed that every individual is fully responsible for their actions and choices, including the good deeds they choose not to perform. Fuck, Mark thought. That's heavy. Jesus! He began serving meals at a Grants Pass warming center during the winter. Cold, miserable homeless people came in off the streets, washed up, ate, and slept. Their most basic needs met, they then thanked him. The experience humbled him.

On his way to the camp, he notices a parked car. Rope holds plastic bags to the roof. A man sits on a basket behind the car. Another man leans against a pickup parked across the street. Duffle bags and a rolling suitcase by his feet. The two of them, Mark assumes, are living out of their vehicles. They'll be told to move along. Or maybe not. As long as a vehicle doesn't leak or make a mess, people won't complain too much.

He imagines their lives: married and young, one person working, one person staying home taking care of their kids and pets. Maybe these two once worked. They were both happy until they weren't. They divorced. Whoever had the better job kept

the apartment. The other one moved out and lived in a motel but soon ran out of money. They didn't have the wherewithal for the first and last month's rent and a security deposit for an apartment. Rental history, letters of reference, none of that. Property managers interviewed them, required proof of income. Yeah, this guy doesn't earn enough. No one in their family wants them, so they retreat into their car. The new normal. Cars have become mobile tent cities. Even Sartre would say, What the fuck?

Mark presumes most of the homeless are from Grants Pass. Why should that matter? They're here now. He wasn't born in Grants Pass. He grew up in Portland, moved to Medford, attended college, and served in the Navy before moving here.

He began seeing increasing numbers of homeless on the street around 2017 or 2018. Then tents started taking over the parks. Drug use fouled the bathrooms. Needles and syringes were scattered on the floor beside people passed out in the toilets. That really got everyone worked up. Concerts in the park got canceled both by COVID and the homeless.

Mark drives downtown passing Evergreen Federal Bank. The bank owner built Taprock Northwest Grill right along the Rogue River. Mark hears jet boats racing up and down the water, the high-pitched engines drowning out all other noise.

He parks outside the camp gate near a police cruiser, the officer inside looking at his phone. A young pregnant woman steps out of a dented Toyota hatchback and approaches him. A man about her age, two small children, and a terrier watch her from the front seat.

Hi, the woman says.

Hi, the officer responds.

His sunglasses catch her reflection and the image of the camp behind her.

I'm Lisa. I was told me and my boyfriend and two kids can't drive into the camp. Where can we park?

Park for? the officer asks.

For overnight. We drove our car into the camp in front of our tent but were told we couldn't do that.

It's not for parking, and out here is private property.

I understand that.

You can park on a city street and walk here.

Mark watches her return to her car and drive a block away and park. He enters the camp, passes a sign outside a tent; *She got the house, I got the shaft. New to town sleeping in my tent need a job anything will help.* He smiles. He is divorced. He moved into a Motel 6 after he and his wife separated. Oh, this won't be so bad, he thought. Well, after six days in a Motel 6, it was bad. She got the house and he took a five-gallon bucket and some tools. But he was fortunate. He had been a Navy pilot for eight years, then flew for the Coast Guard and later the Forest Service before retiring in 2011. He had been frugal and paid off his home. He had a military pension and collected Social Security. He got entrepreneurial. Took a lease on a building and turned it into a medical marijuana dispensary. Hired two of the sharpest guys in the business and got all his money back.

He surveys the camp and estimates it holds at least seventy tents, with at least two people in most of them. He kicks at the ground, considers the stones at his feet. Decomposed granite. It sucks in the heat. At the moment, the temperature hasn't risen above sixty but according to weather forecasts it's supposed to reach ninety and even higher in the coming days.

He approaches a sandy-haired woman with a dog and two sleeping

puppies. They sit in a sliver of angular shade amid a jumble of sleeping bags.

How long have you been here? Mark asks.

She squints at him. Her leathered face etched into a landscape of years.

About a week.

Have you thought about going to the Gospel Rescue Mission shelter?

No. I have medication. Cannabis for PTSD.

Do you have to tell them you do cannabis?

Yep, she says, you have to sign off on the medical.

You don't believe in lying?

No. I can't even steal.

That's honest.

Grants Pass Councilwoman Valerie Lovelace, who represents Ward 2, enters the camp. She holds a small dog and picks her way forward. Her blond hair falls around her ears. She wears a white blouse and blue jeans and adjusts her wide sunglasses.

Good morning, Valerie, Mark says.

Hello, Mark, she says. She puts the dog down. It stays close to her feet.

I wanted to walk my dog, get my dog out for a little bit, she says. He got skunked.

We got seventy some people here, Mark says. And their closest drinking water is a mile and a half away.

Is that really where it is?

The parks weren't the answer but the city has made the situation worse with these camps.

Well, that's why I'm here, Valerie says, her voice light and cheerful.

A man emerges from his tent, sees the councilwoman's dog and squats beside it.

Hi puppers, he says.

He's a friendly dog, Valerie says. He got skunked.

I'm Darren. What kind is he?

My dog is a cockapoo and skunk smell covers his fur. It's really hard to get it out. He's gone through two baths today.

I see, Darren says.

I'm using a homemade remedy to get the smell out but I may have to try something else.

I'm sorry, Mark interrupts, the whole dog discussion doesn't do it for me.

Darren laughs.

I think you have a humanitarian crisis, Valerie.

How about we call it an emergency instead of a crisis, she says. Should we get them some tents?

Something for shade, Darren says. We have tents.

Ninety degree heat coming, Mark says.

We hear the message, Valerie says. This is happening everywhere.

People here have no food, no water, Mark says.

The guy next to me got put in a motel for two nights and is now getting into a program because he's not doing well, Darren says. Lymphedema. He's in a bad way.

They need shelter, Mark says.

Shade would be nice, Darren says.

Things take time, Valerie says. Nobody could anticipate this.

The moment it went to the Supreme Court we could have anticipated this, Mark says.

More homeless people gather around Valerie. She coos to her dog to behave.

This camp isn't much of a plan, Mark says.

This is a plan after the fact, Valerie says.

Lisa, the young pregnant woman, walks back into the camp with her children and her boyfriend. She sees Mark and Valerie and the homeless people gathered around them. She walks up and asks Mark if he has any leads on housing. Before he can answer she tells him she has been homeless for two years. The fathers of her two children want nothing to do with them or her. Her boyfriend is the father of the child she now carries. They had stayed with his father but the old man couldn't deal with her kids and kicked them out. The boyfriend's uncle and sister and her little girl lived in a trailer, but they had no room for them so they left and camped in the mountains around Gold Beach, west of Grants Pass. With winter only a few months away, and knowing they needed a place indoors, they drove here. Lisa found work housekeeping but just two days a week, barely enough for two packs of diapers and wipes. She knows no one in Grants Pass. Her father lives in Wyoming. He shattered an ankle in the oil fields and has applied for disability. Her mother has thyroid cancer and lives with a sister in Texas. If it weren't for her health, she'd let them stay with her. Her

father not so much. He wouldn't be keen on her kids what with his ankle and all.

You can stay in the Gospel Rescue Mission, Mark tells her.

She shakes her head.

I'm pregnant and I got kids to care for.

They'd help with that, Mark says

I'm not leaving my kids with just no one.

Well, you want someplace safe. It's going to get a lot hotter. There's no food or water here. Your kids won't do well. The Gospel Rescue Mission may not be perfect, but it gets you out of here in a secure location, Mark says. Now, it won't take dogs.

I won't give up my dog.

It's your kids' welfare or your dog, Mark says. His voice agitated, rising. Which comes first?

I won't give up my dog.

So is your dog more important?

I'm not saying that. He's family. I just want some help. Why do I have to give up anything?

Mark throws up his hands and walks away. Get rid of the dog and take care of her children. Simple. But where would she take the dog? And maybe her kids are attached to it. Maybe she is. He has seen homeless people with teddy bears. A security sort of thing? he wonders. Why do I have to give up anything? Good point. Mark doesn't know. He sees the police officer outside the gate and consults with him.

That couple with kids, Mark says and points into the camp. They don't have a place. They won't stay in the Gospel Rescue

Mission. Which would take them and the kids but not the dog. But no, they won't give up the dog but they might lose the kids, right? That's Child Protective Services stuff, right? You can't keep a kid here.

The cop leans back. He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly.

It's tough, he says. We used to call CPS all the time, but if the family is in a tent and taking care of the kids they won't do nothing.

That's insane. Not you guys, them.

I don't know what happens. It's sad.

I don't know if moving them is helping but moving them gets them out of the parks, I guess, Mark says. I don't have a solution.

This is all decided by city hall, the officer says.

I think it should be declared a humanitarian crisis.

I don't know, the officer says.

Mark walks back to his Jeep. He sees Lisa leave the camp. She holds one of her children. Her boyfriend holds the dog and the other child.

You OK? Mark asks her.

I'm sorry but the Mission would not be good for my child, Lisa tells him. My daughter is autistic. A shelter has way too many people. It would be way too much stimulation for her.

But on the female side, I heard it was half full, Mark says

So they'll split us up? the boyfriend asks.

I think you'd be together.

Thank you for wanting to help, Lisa says.

Good luck.

Wanting to help wouldn't be good enough for Sartre. Mark doesn't have an answer. Wanting to help wouldn't be good enough for Sartre, Mark thinks. He doesn't have an answer. People rise to their own level of incompetence. I'm on a dog walk and thought I'd drop by. No, Valerie, you need to put a system in place. Everyone blames the homeless. It's not about fault. It's about misfortune and in many cases the bad choices that come from that. The parks provided shade and people could sit on the grass so they wouldn't bake. Now the parks have been cleared. But, Mark wonders, at what cost?

Brock

On a Sunday afternoon, Brock meets Park Watch volunteers at Riverside Park near a gazebo. Sunny day. Green, leafy trees cast shadows dappling the grass with moving shapes. About ten people are gathered together.

I found three needle caps and a needle just now before we even started, Brock says.

One man, Del Aldridge, a retired cable TV technician begins the meeting. A green hat complements his red T-shirt and jeans. He wears a pin, We Love Our Parks.

We're not against the homeless, he says. We're against drugs and the trash. That's what we're here for: to clean the parks.

I love the parks. I want to see them safe and clean, Brock says.

Del asks everyone to introduce themselves. A few of them are first-time volunteers. When they finish speaking, he points to a wagon. It holds gloves, plastic bags, metal trash pickers,

and bottled water. He didn't bring ice for the water, he explains, because it was stolen the last time.

Don't touch anything. Use the pickers, Del says.

I've been coming through this park at night for the past week, Brock says, and I see people looking like they're lost. They're looking for their friends and stuff, but they've all been cleared out. There's a group at the upper gazebo every night, however. Lower gazebo, it's hit and miss.

Baker Park hasn't seen that many people since the parks were cleared, Del says.

It's getting less, Brock says. Depends on what time. They still lock the gate at ten at night, and then people go around it to get in.

They're not stupid, Del says.

We're going to the steps near the river's edge and the second bridge and on to the grassy area to the left beyond the bridge, Brock says. Lots of trash behind there. I just start looking around in the bushes. Never know what you'll find.

A jet boat races past drowning out further conversation. The volunteers fan out.

Brock wonders if he might run into Jack. Doubts it but he never knows. Brock was at a city hall meeting the last time Jack came to the house. He called his mother a fucking bitch and threw a chair. She called the police and he left. With Jack it's all or nothing. Help me or I'll take off. He lived two years in Portland, two years in Medford, and five months in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. Went down there to score some dope and got stuck in the Bay Area. Tough place but he can survive anywhere. Brock can't believe he's still alive. He has been resuscitated half a dozen times at least.

Brock's father abused meth and cocaine; Brock's older brother,

Brad, became a drug addict; and now Jack is one too. It seems like someone falls into addiction in every generation of his family. He lived with his father after his parents divorced. By the age of six he knew certain drugs made you happy, mean, sleepy, or a little of each. He understood that if his father didn't have drugs he'd get mad, and if he had drugs he'd be happy. He got money from him by comprehending his moods. When he was happy Brock would receive his allowance. He freebased with his father at nineteen. One night his father's girlfriend fell and had convulsions. Brock and his father thought she might die, but she came to and they helped her to a couch. They had a three-gram rock of cocaine cooked up and ready to go. Brock looked at his dad and they went into the kitchen to finish it. He still carries an image of his father in the barren kitchen leaning against a table, hitting the pipe, wearing nothing but his underwear. Brock understood then. Really understood. I don't want this life. He quit drugs, broke clean from all of that.

His father was just forty-eight when he died in a garage his mother provided for him. Meth killed him. Brad died in a Medford homeless camp. Alcohol and meth did him in too. Jack has lived in the same camp off and on. A cop knocked on Brock's door and told him about Brad. He'll never forget the sad, discomfited look on the cop's face. The police discovered his body floating in a creek on a midsummer afternoon six days after he died. Brock had heard news reports about a body being found, but he didn't know until the cops showed up two weeks later that it was Brad.

Brock has one other sibling, John, who lives in Florida. He tried drugs. Partied then got serious with life just like Brock. But Brad took a different path. His brain didn't quite work right. Good guy. Everyone loved him. His mother would put him up in apartments when he was younger. Only reason he wasn't homeless then. But he became too much for her. I'm running out of money and I'm scared, she told Brock. I can't

keep doing this. You can't take any more money from Mom, Brock told Brad. Got to hit the rocks, buddy. That ruined their relationship. Created a lot of hostility and bitterness. The same thing with his father. He had nothing good to say about Brock because he had a place, a family, a job, and a nice car. Resentment hooks an addict as much as drugs. They hold bad feelings toward anybody who has something they don't. Like happiness and satisfaction.

Brock has been dealing with other people's drug problems for most of his life. He was born in Petaluma, California. He met his wife in high school. They married and had two sons, Jack and Nick. The boys grew up in a drug-free home, but drugs were a problem in Sonoma County and the Bay Area, and Brock decided to move to Grants Pass where his mother had family. But drugs were a problem here too. A lot of meth in those days, the early 2000s. Then it went away for a bit. Then fentanyl came in.

Nick feels nothing but disgust toward Jack. They don't talk. Jack has two boys, fourteen and seventeen years old. They live with their mother. Jack doesn't see them unless Brock makes the arrangements. Doctors have diagnosed the fourteen-year-old with bipolar disorder. He drinks and uses drugs. His mother does everything she can to straighten him out, but nothing has worked.

I found a ton of burnt foil, Del shouts from behind a stand of trees. You would not believe how much. I'm picking up all this stuff, cans, plastic cups, clothes. Shoes. We cleaned this area up a month and a half ago. Wasn't this bad then.

I hate it when it's near the water, Brock says. Polluting our waterways. I love our rivers here.

Here's another needle cap.

Right on.

I wonder what that is? Dell asks, examining something in the grass.

USB port, Brock says.

Another volunteer, Bryan Weldon, picks up a piece of twine.

This is how they tie off their arms, he says. Slipknot at the end. I find these everywhere.

He drops it into a bag. Bryan is seventy and a recovering alcoholic. Twenty-five years clean and sober. A doctor told him to quit drinking after he suffered two mild heart attacks. Change or you're dead, he said, but it took Bryan's wife to convince him. She threw a phone book at him one night and said she'd had enough. If he didn't find an AA meeting or something, he'd never see her or their three boys again.

The homeless are going to take over our town, Bryan says. They should go to immediate, mandatory detox lock up and rehab. Can't smack them around anymore. I'm too, I don't know, extreme. I shouldn't open my mouth. I believe in the old ways.

He picks up another needle cap and drops it in his bag. He wears a floppy hat, T-shirt and baggy shorts. A Sig Sauer pistol hangs off his right hip. He doesn't go near the parks without it. He thinks carrying a gun deters people who might want to mug him. A large man, he strides forward commenting nonstop about addiction and recovery. Busted for drugs, that old three-strikes-and-you're-out, he believes in that. No one can make someone get sober. By providing camps for the homeless, the city has removed any incentive to stop using. They don't need food and social services. They need to bottom out in the gutter to get clean. Over the years he has tried to help dozens of men beat alcohol. Today, four have been clean and sober for more than one year. Six are dead. He doesn't know what happened to the rest of them. If it wasn't for AA, he'd be in the grave.

Brock appreciates Bryan's opinions but he isn't convinced that one approach can or should be applied to everyone. Not all people quit cigarettes or lose weight the same way. A homeless woman rode her bicycle past a Park Watch cleanup one weekend and thanked them. Not all of them are doing fentanyl.

Staring at the ground, Brock searches for used needles. He's the hands-on guy in his family, out in the parks with Park Watch and looking for Jack. He knows Jack wants nothing to do with him, but if he could put his eyes on him it would make Brock feel better. It's the worst thing in the world for a parent to watch their child slowly kill themselves. Even worse when he doesn't see it.

Park Watch has been his therapy. Before the group formed he carried an all-consuming anger. He has been in one fight. The person wasn't homeless but he was in Riverside Park buying drugs from a guy everyone called Wheelchair Johnny. The buyer drove up onto the grass and spun a wheelie near where Brock was wiping down picnic tables. Brock walked a little distance away and called 911. When he got off the phone he noticed the buyer had snatched his bucket. Hey, that's my bucket, man. The buyer shoved him and they exchanged blows. One of the buyer's friends grabbed Brock from behind. Oh, gosh this is getting bad, Brock thought. He jumped away and sprayed them with mace as three police cars raced up, sirens blaring. For a moment Brock was no longer in the park but back in his house on one of those nights he had called the cops on Jack. I need you to remove him but not beat him up. They didn't. They've been really good just as they were with Wheelchair Johnny, the buyer, and his buddy. They did their jobs and took them in. Period.

Jack was a good kid but Brock had a nagging feeling he would be susceptible to addiction. He always overindulged. He would consume candy or eat at a buffet until he got sick. Anything that made him happy he overdid, and that made Brock think if Jack got into drugs he'd be screwed. Brock prayed. He wasn't

religious but he sought out God, a higher power, whatever anyone wanted to call it, to spare his son. Please don't let Jack fall into drugs like my father and brother. Brock knows all of Jack's lawyers, probation officers, doctors, counselors, therapists. He has been right there with him but none of them have persuaded Jack to confront his addiction.

One night, Jack told Brock, Dad, I'm a responsible drug user. What do you mean? Brock asked. I won't go to sleep without something to wake up to, a fix in the morning. He had always wanted to be the party kid. He was disruptive in school, and Brock and his wife would meet with all of his teachers. They liked him, he was smart, but he distracted the other kids. By the time he was seventeen he had been kicked out of high school, continuation schools, all of them.

Drinking worked for me for a lot of years, Bryan says, picking up more twine. I liked to party. In San Francisco I met The Doors and The Grateful Dead. Phil Graham had the best concerts. I met what's her name. She OD'd. Janis Joplin. Here take some acid. Fun times.

The other volunteers chuckle. After an hour of scouring the park, they regroup and dump the drug paraphernalia they found into a sack in the wagon.

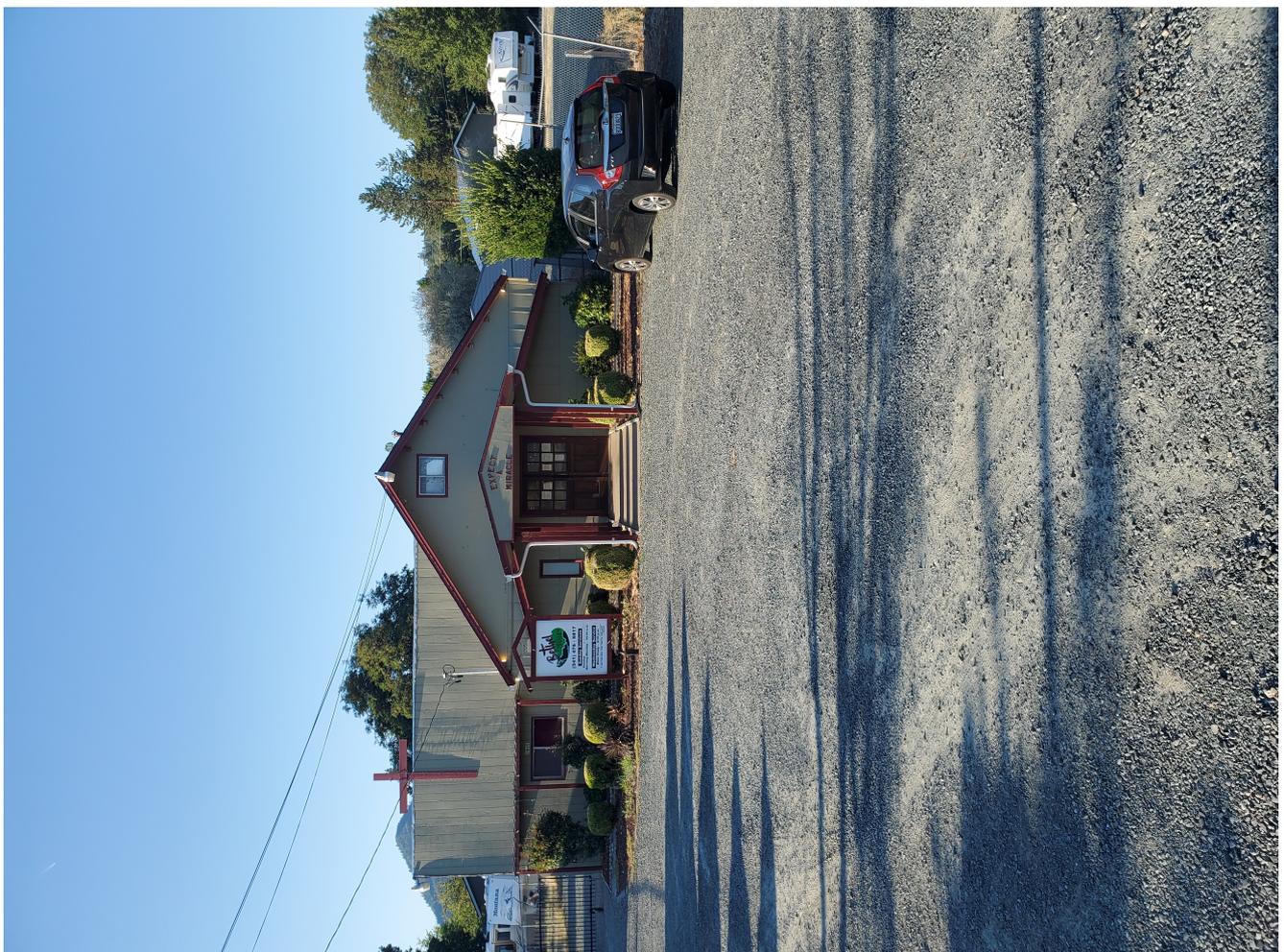
Who needs something to drink? Dell asks.

He offers bottles of water. Brock takes one.

Aren't you afraid of overdosing, he asked Jack one day. No, I can never get enough money to OD, dad. But Jack did worry, worried enough to have Brock watch him shoot up one morning. He was staying at the house. Brock stood in the kitchen ready to leave for work. He grabbed his lunch and was about to walk out the door when Jack called, Dad! What? Come here. Brock hurried to Jack's bedroom and looked in. He saw Jack about to insert a needle in his left arm. I've got some new stuff, he told Brock. I don't know how strong it is. I need you to get

some Narcan and watch me for ten minutes. He injected the drug before Brock could respond and lay back on his bed. Stunned, Brock grabbed a can of Narcan and stood outside the door and called Jack's name every twenty seconds. Jack! Yeah. Jack! Yeah. Jack! Yeah, until he finally said, You can stop. I'm OK, Dad. Brock could barely move. He put the Narcan away, got in his car and cried all the way to work. He was furious, sad, terrified. How could you make me watch you shoot up? What was I going to do? Not watch you? Fuck you, I'm leaving for work? Wonder all day if you died and carry that guilt for the rest of my life if you did?

It's been shit like that with Jack for he doesn't know how long.



Part Three

Helen

The fans in Helen's room stir the warm night air. She stares at the ceiling, unable to sleep, Justin beside her, Jessica out somewhere. Pizza wasn't bad. Plenty left over. She hears the dogs panting. She could survive on Devils Slide again. If she had to. Built a minihome out of twenty-six wood pallets when she lived on the mountain. Pulled them apart and built a frame and walls. Nailed boards across the back to keep it stable. Like a house built out of Popsicle sticks.

She loved the solitude of living in dense woods. Like a homesteader. Camped not far from some train tracks. Five in the morning, every morning, the Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad would send a long train blasting by and wake her up. Her personal alarm clock. She washed in a creek, dressed, and walked her bicycle down a beaten path to the tracks shiny with dew. Followed them to a cut in the trees and emerged onto a neighborhood street and peddled furiously. At the time, she was employed by Miracle Workers, a housecleaning business owned by an elderly lady everyone called Miss Bonnie. She found the job through a friend. I need help cleaning a house, she told Helen. I'll give you a few bucks. Helen had no idea people cleaned houses for a living. Miss Bonnie liked how she worked and hired her. Helen told her she lived on Devils Slide but Miss Bonnie didn't care as long as she was dependable. Had to be on time. Clients have a schedule, Miss Bonnie told her. She allowed Helen just two hours to clean each house. Miss Bonnie sold Helen her Mitsubishi Eclipse for one dollar. It was a piece of junk and not worth fifty cents, but it ran and was an improvement over the bicycle. After work, she parked on Upper River Road by a trail that led to the mountain.

Helen earned \$13.25 an hour. Take-home pay varied depending on how many houses Miss Bonnie sent her to. After work, she stopped at the food bank and filled her backpack with

supplies. She bought alcohol and meth too. Some days she showered at Miss Colleen's house before hiking back up the mountain. Leftover food spoiled after two days in an ice chest. In winter it froze and lasted longer. She and Justin stayed on Devils Slide for four years until her body could no longer take the daily trek up and down the mountain.

When they left Devils Slide, Helen stopped using meth and slowed her drinking. She had become too much like her sister. The mountain had ruined her knees, and the booze and drugs had taken a toll on the rest of her. Something had to give. Miss Bonnie retired and the business closed. Helen continued working for a few of her clients and they referred her to friends. Then she met Pastor Moore. They'd still be on the street if it wasn't for him. Life has a way of working itself out. She hopes that will be the case again if she has to move.

Darren

In the morning when he emerges from his tent in the J Street Camp, Darren peers out at the cool mist fingering the air before the day's heat begins to press down. He rolls a smoke. He wears a blue cap. A thin beard wreaths his gaunt, pale face. He licks the cigarette, sealing it and strikes a match. He is doing OK. A doctor told him he was somewhat bipolar. He's not sure what that means, "somewhat" bipolar. He thought it was all or nothing. He never served in the military. The same doctor told him he had PTSD and suggested it might be from the stress of life. If that's the case, Darren figures damn near everyone he knows has PTSD.

Maybe the doctor thinks his health problems caused his mental health issues. He has had trouble with his back since he was young. Two lower discs affected by arthritis, two other lower discs disintegrating, the middle of his back herniated, and the upper half with scoliosis. In addition, he has asthma and

ulcers. I got slammed, he told the doctor. The doctor didn't disagree. Darren has applied for disability but has not been approved.

Like many people in Grants Pass, Darren was born in California. Town of Riverside. He never knew his father. Never shook his hand, spoke on the phone, looked him in the eye. He and his mother moved up and down California—Fresno, North Fork—places like that. Never could quite get settled. His mother worked in a factory making carbonate drill bits. She did that for years. Nasty, dirty job. Darren remembers her coming home covered in black dust.

He has been dependent on his family for most of his life. Had trouble keeping jobs because of his health problems. As an adult, Darren lived with his mother and two aunts in a rental unit. Within seven years they all had died. Darren knew the day would come when he'd have to leave. No one offered to take him in. When the time came, he packed his duffle bag, tent, and some other things and stayed in Baker Park. Fifty-eight and homeless. Life had taught him to have reduced aspirations, and this was about as reduced as he could get. He thought in a week or two he would be stripped bare, stabbed, and left rotting in a gutter. Never happened. He feels good about that. Unlike other homeless people, he doesn't own much. Some people have way too much stuff. Stuff, stuff, stuff, they need their stuff. He has a good tent. More than enough room for him, his clothes and a few other items. Other than things he wishes he had, like cigarettes, which he shouldn't smoke because of his asthma, he has all he needs. He'll never go back to Baker Park. It was the worst. All the druggies. He stayed in Tussing Park close to the river, and then moved to the J Street Camp after the Supreme Court ruling.

So far the "less desirables," as he calls some of the people in the camp, have not bothered him. He has never argued or fought with anyone or had anything stolen. Hey old man, how's it going? people ask him, and that's about it. He finds it

strange when he sees a house. He wonders what the owners might be doing. Are they watching TV? Having dinner? Sitting around? He thinks about it. Must be nice to sleep on a bed. To have a couch, watch a movie, or play cards.

He had been on the street for a few months when a girl—nineteen years old he'd guess—with a big shit-eating grin came skipping and jumping over to his tent and plopped her ass down. Can I help you? he said. Look at my knives, she said. What? Darren said. She showed him three big fucking bowie knives. Nice knives, he said. She seemed displeased by his response. Like he hadn't expressed enough enthusiasm. What was he supposed to say? Please don't kill me?

Fifteen minutes later she got into a fistfight with another young woman and beat her ass. Holy crap, Darren said. She looked at him with that big shit-eating grin, came back over, and they talked for a good half hour about her life on the street and how she became homeless. She gave him tips too. Mostly just watch your butt. And don't associate with strangers carrying knives. Thanks for that advice, he told her.

Hey old timer, a man says.

What's up?

Nothing. I'm on the rotation. Have to move Thursday to A Street. It's a lot smaller. Less than half the size of here. But I can come back in 24 hours.

Makes no sense, Darren says.

Won't let you leave your stuff. Gotta take it with you.

Oh, I doubt that. You'll be able to leave your stuff. They don't expect you to tote tents all day, do they?

It's inconvenient, the man says.

I agree with you on that, Darren says.

The knife girl still comes around. Gives him hugs and tells him about her day. Sometimes he doesn't see her for weeks. Darren thinks she has a place to stay and but won't tell anyone. Maybe she gets back with her family and tries to work things out. Maybe from time to time she tries to do right by herself. Good for her, but he misses her. She calls him her favorite old man. He doesn't know why but it pleases him. He has no one else.

Helen

Helen loads her car with cleaning supplies, bucket, mop, vacuum. She checks to make sure she has gray pads she found in the drywall section of Home Depot. Amazing little things. Remove soap scum on shower walls just like that. Window scraper, got that. Good in showers too. All the little cleaning tricks she figured out on her own. To unclog a sink she applies three effervescent denture tabs and three tablespoons of bleach. Works on teeth, she thought, should work on drains. Made sense. It bubbles up and plows right through the clog. She has a good technique for cleaning ovens too. She doesn't like harsh chemicals so she uses a brush. Not a brush exactly. Like a Brillo pad but not as abrasive. She carries Windex and Mr. Clean. Screwdrivers in case she has to be Miss Fix It. Carpet Fresh for the rug.

She turns onto Rogue River Highway and drives to Country Estates, a mobile home park where eighty-one year old Sandy Gallo lives. She parks, hauls out her supplies, and walks up the wooden porch steps, pausing to catch her breath. Then she knocks on the metal screen door and lets herself in, careful not to let it bang shut behind her.

Hello, Miss Sandy. I made it, she says, stepping into the carpeted living room. How are you doing?

Miss Sandy smiles at Helen from a leather recliner.

I knew you would be here. I'm better.

Looking forward to your doctor's appointment?

Yeah.

I got you down on my phone for the twenty-fifth, Helen says. I'll pick you up and take you.

Yes, thank you.

Miss Sandy sighs. She has a bruised right knee, curvature of the spine, and struggles with her weight but she's feeling better. The good news, according to her doctor, is that the knee should heal itself, however he can do nothing for her spine. She can stand, but not for long, and uses a walker. Simple tasks like reaching into the refrigerator hurt. Sometimes she just gives up and food spoils.

Anything in particular or just the usual? Helen asks her.

Well—Miss Sandy pauses—the fridge needs to be cleaned. I didn't eat the oranges. There's tuna I haven't eaten too; that needs to go. When in doubt, ask; but most of it needs to go.

OK.

The bathroom, I dropped some trash.

I won't vacuum it up. I'll pick it up.

Dropped some pills. A cap on a pill bottle needs to be put on. Clean it out.

Yes, of course, Helen says.

When you make the bed, fold my towel. The kitchen is a mess

Should have seen mine this morning.

You cook?

Yes, but I cleaned it.

Miss Sandy has known Helen for two years. A friend referred her. She couldn't maintain the house without her.

When I used to walk, I'd prep before you came.

Helen laughs.

Most people do. Clean the house before the cleaner gets here. Makes my job easier.

Helen approaches each house differently depending on what the owner prioritizes. It keeps the work interesting. Miss Sandy's will be a two-hour house. The home with the alpacas is much bigger and takes longer. Helen usually starts at the back of a house, but here she'll begin in the kitchen because Miss Sandy has dishes in the sink. Helen doesn't clean dishes in everybody's home. That costs extra but Miss Sandy has only a few dishes so she'll start there, put them in a bucket to soak, and then move on to the bedroom. She has been to houses where the owners don't do dishes at all. When Miracle Workers employed her, Helen cleaned the house of a lady who owned a pot farm. Workers ate in the kitchen and stacked their dirty dishes in the sink. You're not paying us enough, Helen and her two coworkers thought. They would draw straws. The loser got the dishes.

Are the clothes in the dryer dry, Helen?

I'll check.

She leaves the kitchen and stops in the laundry room.

Yes, ma'am. Dry.

She removes the clothes and folds them. Certain things she'll do for Miss Sandy she won't do for other people because they

aren't disabled. Like taking her to the doctor. A friend normally drives her but sometimes she can't and Helen fills in. She also removes the garbage and picks up the mail.

My pajamas and robe, just hang on my door, Helen.

OK.

Thank you.

Miss Sandy, which drawer would you like your nightgowns in?

Second one.

Helen walks into the bedroom. She strips the bed and applies clean sheets. She folds the corners and tucks in a blanket on top of the sheets and hangs a robe on the closet door and shuts it. Picks up bits of trash and wipes down a night table.

She feels tired. Justin wouldn't take his meds this morning. Why did she just pick up his new depression prescription if he won't take them? He saw a psychiatrist the other day. The doctor told him, You're not active, you eat the wrong food. He blames Helen. Like a two-year-old. The doctor said, Don't pay attention to what he says and see if the new meds work.

Miss Sandy, do you need water?

I'm fine, thank you.

Helen walks into the bathroom and cleans the shower. Miss Sandy listens to her work. She worries she might have to move. The trailer park owner has decided to sell. Some tenants have discussed buying it. If they don't, another company will, and Miss Sandy feels sure the monthly fees will increase. She already pays eight hundred and some odd dollars in fees every four weeks. She may leave for a place where she'd get more help, assisted living, something like that. She'd prefer to stay. Everything is just so expensive.

I noticed you had a little water left in your breathing machine, Helen says. I threw the water out.

Oh good, thank you.

It amazes Miss Sandy the things she asks Helen to do, things she used to do without thinking. Cleaning the refrigerator. Folding her clothes and putting them away. Normal stuff. In the fall, Helen rakes the leaves and puts them in bags. She cleans windows without being asked. Never did Miss Sandy think she'd need this kind of help. I'm still upright, she reminds herself. Better than the alternative.

Helen?

Yes ma'am

In the spare bedroom there's a plastic bag for the mail.

I got it

And would you put a towel on my chair?

I gotcha.

Helen grabs a brown towel from the laundry room. She wouldn't know what to do with herself if she didn't work. Stew about Justin probably. She folds the towel over the chair in the spare room and takes the garbage from beneath the sink. She walks out to her car, puts it in the backseat and drives to a dumpster in the mobile home park. Nearby stand a row of mailboxes. She retrieves Miss Sandy's mail and drops it on the passenger seat. She hopes Miss Sandy can stay here. Imagine having to move at her age. Just thinking about leaving the church exhausts her, and she's almost thirty years younger than Miss Sandy.

Brock

Some nights Brock leaves his house between 9:30 and 10 o'clock and walks through Riverside Park with a body camera and a flashlight. The grass, wet from sprinklers, dampens his shoes. Only a few months ago tents filled the park. Now not one. A soothing, summer quiet fills the empty spaces. He sees a man with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. They greet each other and keep moving. Probably homeless but he has a right to be in the park like anyone else as long as he doesn't camp.

Brock steps off the grass and onto a walk and stomps water off his shoes. He walks down a hill that opens into a wide field. He smells the leafy scent of the grass, hears a car turn down a street, sees the long sweep of its headlights. He shines his flashlight but sees nothing but the trees and the frantic darting of a squirrel. He walks on.

Jack stole a pistol from Brock in 2016, 2017, somewhere around then. He wanted to sell it to his heroin dealer for dope, then sell some of the dope, get the gun back, and return it before Brock noticed. That was his plan, but Brock knew immediately his gun was missing. He called Jack and told him if he didn't see that firearm back in his house that minute he was going to call the cops. Jack didn't comply and Brock pressed charges and testified before a grand jury. Jack served eighteen months in prison. Brock believes he can be compassionate and still hold Jack's feet to the fire. Actions have consequences. No coddling. Send someone like Jack to jail and it might save their life. Forced rehab. Bryan's right. Brock believes in that. Most addicts would not take rehab if it was offered to them. Lock them up for a month, then ask them. Brock is convinced they'd say, Thank you.

Streetlights illuminate the swings and a slide of a small playground. Twigs break beneath Brock's feet. He sees the boat ramp. A woman with dirty blond hair stays down here with a pit bull. He's never had a confrontation with her, but he did with one of her friends, a woman in a white Dodge SUV. She started screaming at him, Get the fuck out of the park. Her boyfriend

joined in and before Brock knew it they were standing chest to chest. He walked away. The woman had two kids and they were screaming at him too. Like feral animals.

He meanders up a hill, the dark enveloping him. Tents once were pitched all over here too. Got the tents gone but Brock still sees people hanging around late at night. Can't very well call the cops on a guy sitting on a bench. But if he sees a tent going up, he'd say something. He notices vans in the shadows and assumes people are asleep in them. Only a few and not doing any harm. He's not out to get anyone. He wants the parks to be used for what they were intended, nothing more or less. The other day when Park Watch did a cleanup, he noticed a family having a picnic. They had balloons. The weekend before, he saw a mother playing with her four kids. It made him feel good.

A breeze rustles his shirt. He walks between trees, their long shadows extending into the dark. He has probably spent three-hundred-and-some hours with Jack in methadone clinics. Every morning, fifteen to twenty minutes for more than three years, seven days a week. Jack would quit methadone for a while and then reenroll in the program. All sorts of people stopped at the clinic. Men and women in business suits on their way to work and people casually dressed. A few hung out but most got back in their cars and left. Sometimes Jack would have a take-home dose for the next day. He'd sell it. Brock watched him scam everybody. His counselors never comprehended the true Jack. They saw what he allowed them to see. He convinced a doctor to take him off benzos— benzodiazepine—and put him on another drug. Jack didn't want to quit drugs, however. He was just looking for a better high. He knew how to take what the doctor gave him and mix it with something else for that special kick. He was smart. Most of those guys are.

Brock used to feel ashamed and wouldn't talk about Jack. He doesn't feel ashamed now. Exhausted, frustrated, and scared, yes, but no shame. He expects that call one day, that knock on

the door, but if Jack died tomorrow, he would know he'd done everything he could for him. He never shunned him. Some addicts haven't spoken to their families in years. Brock and Jack have their angry moments but he has never pushed his son away.

He takes one final look around. Porch lights shimmer beyond the park. Nothing moves. In the tranquility of night that allows for moments of reflection, Brock considers his life. He has survived where others in his family have not. He will never give up on Jack. When he was a baby, a newborn, Brock held him for hours. I will be here for you no matter what, he whispered. Jack is still his son. And this is no matter what.

Helen

Memories:

First camping ticket: Around the time her mother died. Helen lay down in Riverside Park, a backpack beneath her head. A police officer told she was illegally camping.

Hope and Miracle: In 2022 she ran into a homeless dude with a shopping cart walking two dogs. Helen heard whimpering from the cart. He showed her nine, white-and-brown eight-week-old puppies covered in feces. A mix of Labrador and pit bull. She directed him to Morrison Park. It had hot water and he could clean the puppies. I'm looking to sell them to get a ticket to Texas, he told her. She met him later. He had cleaned the puppies but Helen saw they were all underweight. She scooped up one, a male. There was something about holding him. The comfort his soft body provided. The dude said, Keep it. She took the puppy back to the church. He's staying, Justin said. They named him Hope. Helen returned to the park, gave the dude a pizza and picked up another puppy, a female. She's staying, Justin said. They named her Miracle.

Pajama Guy: He always ran around in his pj's. He was very reserved. Kept to himself. So many homeless people do. He left his Morrison Park camp for the corner store one afternoon and on his way back collapsed and died. Temperatures were almost 100 that day.

Annabel: Helen loved her to death. Walking her bike down Devils Slide one morning, she saw Annabel laying on the ground. Pink hair, blue lips. At first Helen thought she was dead. Nineteen years old. She said she had been drugged and raped. Helen helped her file a police report. Annabel stayed with her on the mountain for months. She has a house and a husband now and lives near Eugene, Oregon. She must be about twenty-four.

Joseph

Joseph pitches his tent not far from the entrance to the J Street Camp and next to the tent of a woman and her brother. Her name is Laura and his name is Phil. Turns out he knew Joseph's father. Laura and Phil read James Patterson novels. Joseph sits with them but doesn't say much.

When he was sixteen and still in high school, he suffered a traumatic brain injury. He's twenty-six now so that would be what? Ten years ago? He thinks so. He and some friends got high and drunk and one of them took his mother's Winnebago and they all piled in and raced down the street. Joseph no longer remembers which one of them got it in their head to swing a baseball bat out of the passenger window and knock off mailboxes. Joseph leaned out a back window to watch. Bat boy hit more than a few mailboxes before he missed one and struck a telephone pole. The bat ripped out of his hands and smashed into Joseph's face. He collapsed unconscious, and his friends freaked out. They rushed him to a hospital and left him outside the emergency entrance and sped off. Joseph suffered fractures in three places that required the removal of part of

his skull. He received eight metal plates and thirty-six screws in his head, and he lost his hearing in his left ear. He was sent by air ambulance to a Portland hospital where he stayed for two months. A judge sentenced the driver of the Winnebago to five years in prison. His mother said he stole the vehicle.

Lion Heart was being chased by three dogs over there, Laura tells Joseph, nodding her head toward the far end of the camp. She puts her book down. They need to get those dogs fucking tied up.

That's why Lion Heart walks around with a stick, Phil says.

Someone left three dogs in a van and one died of heat stroke, Laura says. I mean how stupid. It's 102 outside.

Joseph owns a seven-year-old husky named Marley. He would never let anything happen to him. Goes wherever Joseph goes. Church people give him food. When he has seizures, Marley sits on him and licks his face. Joseph wakes up covered in piss. That's how he knows he had a seizure. He wouldn't piss himself otherwise.

When the Portland hospital discharged him, his mother took him home and told him to pack his stuff. She was pregnant with her boyfriend's child. He didn't want to take on another man's son, especially one so banged up. Not his problem.

Joseph's father was in a drug- and alcohol-rehab program at the time, so Joseph couch surfed until his father returned to Grants Pass and then he roomed with him off and on. He and his father look alike and share the same first name. They have birthdays in November one day apart. His father was born on November 12 and Joseph on November 13. He thinks that's pretty cool. Despite the rehab program his father never stopped using. When the cops busted him for possession Joseph stayed on the street and watched his stuff. When his father wasn't in jail, he worked. Handyman stuff, construction, field work.

He's back in rehab now.

Joseph has been denied disability and works when he can. Fast food joints usually, but he has trouble concentrating and remembering orders. He speaks in a nasal monotone that sometimes rises to a shout for no reason. Words get caught in his throat. He can stare at a wall for hours and not know why. Customers trip out trying to get his attention.

Phil works a few days out of the month, Laura says, and I get disability so that's income. Not enough but it's income.

I've been collecting cans to get fifty bucks, Joseph says.

Did you ever do fentanyl?

No, but I did other drugs, Joseph says.

I smoke weed, Laura says. I used to drink but that got me in trouble and almost dead.

Joseph settles in his chair. He met a chick about a year after the accident and they had two daughters but she got into fentanyl and Joseph left her. He didn't handle their breakup in the best way but he didn't want to be around her anymore. When he finds a place, he'll see his kids. They must be six and five now. One was born in May 2018 and the other one sometime in October 2019. They stay with their mother's father. She lived on his property in a trailer until he threw her out for leaving them to buy dope. He put a chain on the gate and said, You're not coming back; stay the fuck away. Joseph got along with him and wants him to know he's trying to do right.

Me and Phil hope to be in a place soon, Laura says. Depending on how fast HUD moves. The owner of a building we looked at has worked with HUD. All the light switches work. Smoke detectors work. There's hot water.

I'm on a HUD list, Joseph says. I don't know why I'm not

getting disability. I just need a place. Just me and my dog.

I haven't been in a bed for almost six months bouncing back and forth between the parks, Laura says.

She resumes reading. Joseph feels himself drifting and closes his eyes. He texted his mother the night of the accident. I'm playing Xbox at my friend's house, he wrote. Last thing he remembers. Then he woke up in a hospital room. He looked out a window and saw skyscrapers. Wow, Grants Pass has gotten big, he thought. A doctor told him he was in Portland. Oh, Joseph said. He fingered a cold sore on his lip. Other than that he thought he was all right.

Helen

Pastor Moore arrives at the church in his pickup on a Tuesday morning in early September. He wears a suit and tie, his gray hair combed to one side. He has come to meet with two church administrators. They arrive shortly after him. Helen recognizes one of them as the man who told her two weeks earlier she had to leave. When he looks at her, she tells him she removed the trash as he had asked. He doesn't respond. He peers inside her room, at Hope and Miracle barking at him, and makes no comment.

Pastor Moore takes the men through the kitchen and down a hall to the vestibule to talk. The man Helen recognizes says that she, Justin, and Jessica must leave. Their presence, he insists, violates the bylaws. Pastor Moor objects.

Where does it say in the Bible we put people out on the street? he asks. Where does it say a church can't have a caretaker? Just because I no longer live here, doesn't mean they can't.

What would Jesus do? Put them out on the street?

He quotes from the book of Matthew: And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

The two men remain unmoved. The discussion gets heated. Pastor Moore folds his hands behind his back and looks at the floor. He won't get drawn into a shouting match. The three of them walk out the front door and continue talking. Fifteen minutes later, Pastor Moore walks into the kitchen, where Helen has been waiting. She hears a car leaving the church.

Well, Pastor Moore says.

Well, Helen says. We don't have to go nowhere?

Not today, anyways. They're going to send a formal notice of eviction.

He looks at Helen, his face somber. He has pastored at the church since 2018. He presumes he will be called to church headquarters. If it becomes a grilling, if he is asked to step down, he doesn't know what he'll do.

They want you gone, Helen.

He stands. He remembers when Helen and Justin showed up at the church. He could see in their eyes that they were good kids. At seventy-three he looks at everyone as a kid. He doesn't understand why the church leadership wants them out. They make it sound like he has violated every rule by letting them stay. There are some people, even within a church, who simply don't like the homeless. They seem to forget the teachings of Christ and lean into those things in the Bible that suit what they want to believe. Pastor Moore doesn't care for that.

Giving Helen, Justin, and Jessica a room had been a gesture of kindness. He didn't think of bylaws. If he is asked to resign, he can refuse. Then it would be a dogfight, lawyer versus

lawyer. Or he could leave on his own and resign before they ask him. Pull out, and spare himself the trouble. Spend more time with his beautiful new wife. He thinks the world of Helen. One way or the other it will work out. God is the one in control. Whatever shot God calls, everyone will have to live by. I adore these kids, he has told his wife. But in a church that professes the love of God but dislikes the homeless, he suspects his love won't be enough.

They want you gone, Pastor Moore says again, and probably me too.

Helen sighs. She has St. Vincent de Paul sandwiches to pick up and deliver to J Street, a distraction she looks forward to. People have gotten meaner, she thinks, grown hard. She considers the possibility of losing what little she has. She needs to speak to Justin and Jessica. The other day Jessica told her she'd camp on Devils Slide if worse came to worst. Justin said nothing. He lay on the bed out of it.

Helen finds her sandwich wagon and puts it in the trunk of her car. Justin doesn't offer to join her. What will she do with him? What will she do without him? She won't abandon him or Jessica. He's a big baby sometimes but he's her big baby. They've been through so much together. If nothing else, the street creates a bond. Love and friendship. The basics still matter.^[1]

^[1] The Pentecostal Church of God headquarters in Drain, Oregon, would not comment for this story. In January 2025, the Grants Pass City Council voted to close the J Street Camp and limit the smaller camp to overnight stays only. Disability Rights Oregon filed a lawsuit later that month to stop the city from forcing disabled homeless people to live without adequate shelter in life-threatening conditions. A temporary restraining order now bars Grants Pass from enforcing most of

its homeless camping regulations.