

Homeless

By Stephen Gauer

When his marriage ended, Potter took his share of the money from the house and bought a condo overlooking the lake, not far from the newspaper where he worked. He'd never lived downtown before and now he could walk to the office in less than five minutes. The condo was very small. He turned the bedroom into a study, lining the walls with shelves for his books, and slept on a pull-out sofa in the living room. At night, facing south, he could see the lights of the island below and beyond him. At dawn, he woke to the brilliant radiance of light on water, and the reassuring geometry of the horizon line separating sky and lake. He loved to sit and look out at the water and the sky and the clouds, because they were always changing shape and colour. Always different, but in the end always the same.

Every morning he walked out of the elevator and crossed the lobby, said good morning to the smiling security guard at the desk, and walked the three short blocks to the tall gray building where he worked. One morning he noticed a man in filthy clothes sleeping in the alley beside the building. He went over to see if the man was conscious or not, and his movements somehow startled the man, who opened his eyes and cursed Potter and asked him what the fuck he was doing. Nothing, Potter said, he was only

checking. The man said checking what? Potter backed away. Fuck off then, the man said.

Potter told this story to his editor a few minutes later and she laughed. They were standing by his desk in the newsroom discussing feature ideas. Potter was one of a select group of feature writers still working at the paper. Every year their numbers dwindled, as the circulation and advertising revenues at the paper dwindled. He knew he would likely end up either writing press releases in a soulless government office or back on the news desk writing five-inch stories about three-alarm fires and gun shootings and petty scandals at City Hall and coyotes who ate chihuahuas because people were stupid enough to feed them. He'd been at the paper for almost 20 years, much too long, according to his ex-wife, but what else could he do? He'd never done anything else, never wanted to do anything else.

We haven't done the homeless thing for a while, the editor said.

He agreed. There was a successful city program that put homeless people into subsidized apartments, helped and mentored them while they went for retraining or drug rehab. Did anyone care about the losers who were left?

They're mentally ill, she said, not losers.

No, I think they're losers, Potter said. They want to be on the street.

You should find out the truth, she said. He thought about it for a moment. They discussed some other ideas. She agreed to some of them. But he kept thinking about the homeless idea and he realized no one had really done it properly. No one had become homeless and then written about it. What a huge challenge it would be. But he could do it. He could do it for three or four months and write a story a week, say 800

words, using a computer at a library, and at the end of it have a book. He'd written two already that had sunk without a trace. But the third one would be the lucky one that would lift him out of the newsroom to some higher, different place. He didn't know where exactly. But he could do it.

I'll do 800 words, he told her the next day. I'll be homeless myself and do 800 words. Like a columnist.

She laughed. The only non-political columnist left on staff was a former movie reviewer who worked from his house in the suburbs and wrote mildly amusing but extremely repetitive pieces about his dog, his ten-year-old car, his six-year-old computer and his much younger wife. They both hated the column. Potter never got past the first paragraph.

I want to do it for three or four months, he said.

That's a long time to lose you from features, she said.

But I'd file every week. From the library. It would be brilliant. A prize-winner.

She talked to the managing editor, who then ran it by the publisher, who in turn was so enthusiastic he came out of his office and chatted with Potter for almost two minutes. The publisher pointed out they were breaking new ground and that stories like this could help turn things around. Potter agreed and said he thought it was a great story that needed telling. They shook hands. There were legal requirements, of course, releases and statements of indemnification so that if anything went wrong the paper would not be held liable. Nothing will go wrong, Potter said. Of course it won't, said the publisher. But just in case.

Potter didn't want to spend a lot of time preparing for the assignment. It was already early August and he wanted to be out on the street by the middle of the month. Three months took him to mid-November, when the cold weather would make sleeping outdoors very uncomfortable. He wasn't afraid to get dirty, grow a beard, wear the same clothes every day for weeks, but he hated the idea of being cold and being outside. So he would have to work fast. He spent a day organizing his clothes: the rattiest pair of blue jeans he had, a couple of old t-shirts, a Blue Jays cap and a shapeless green pullover that his ex-wife had knitted him in a rare burst of domestic enthusiasm during the first year of their marriage. He scrounged a smelly old sleeping bag from a friend's basement. He bought a wire mesh shopping cart and left it out overnight in the rain so it would accumulate rust. He stopped shaving and combing his hair and brushing his teeth. He looked at himself in the mirror and grinned at the maniacal face he saw. He was scared, nervous and excited, all the same time. He hadn't felt like this for a very long time.

He left his wallet and keys and watch with his editor. She made him promise to call or email every other day. They picked a coffee shop near Yonge and Bloor to use as a meeting place. He said he would stash some money in a secret hiding place near his building just in case. Just in case what? she asked. Just in case I need it, he said.

Are you sure you want to do this? she asked.

Of course, I'm sure.

He had no idea how to start being a homeless man in downtown Toronto, so he simply got up one morning, put on his homeless clothes, jammed the sleeping bag and pullover into the rusty shopping cart and walked out of his building. The young security guard smiled and nodded as usual. On the street, Potter walked east as he always did and turned at Yonge and headed north, but this time he kept going, past the gray building where he worked.

People were streaming to work. He streamed with them and they ignored him, which was normal because people always ignored you on the streets of Toronto. He tried to catch the eyes of a few well-dressed women, but no one responded, no one smiled at him. He was pleased. This meant the outfit was convincing. He was passing.

At the corner of Bay and Queen, a man was lying on his back, eyes closed, on a dirty blanket, with a grimy hand outstretched in the air. Potter went right over to him and knelt down and stared at him, something he had never done before. The man sensed his presence and began to growl and then opened his eyes. Money, he said, a nickel a dime a quarter a time? Potter said no. The man's hand brushed his leg and he stepped away. Then Potter reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar and gave it to the man. The man smiled and laughed. Then he fell back onto the blanket and closed his eyes and stretched his hand out again.

Potter pulled his cart south a couple of blocks, then propped it against a building, took his cap off, put a couple of coins in and held it out to the people streaming by. He tried to catch their eyes as he murmured change, spare change? He felt completely ridiculous. How could he possibly spend three months doing this? No one would even look at him, let alone give him money. Then a young man in shorts, sandals and a

AC/DC t-shirt stopped directly in front of him. Hey man, he said. Down on your luck, eh? Potter nodded. I've been there, the man said and dropped something in the cap. Be cool, he said, as he walked away.

Potter looked in the cap. The man had given him three nickels.

Potter spend three hours in six locations in the financial district and collected a grand total of \$1.86, which was just enough to buy a tall mild at a Starbucks on Yonge where he used to meet friends for coffee. He knew one of the baristas there, a young woman who looked Italian or Spanish and he'd flirted a few times with her and she'd always responded with enough enthusiasm to encourage him to think that she might go out with him despite the obvious difference in their ages. Did that matter anymore? Potter wasn't sure, but he didn't think so. Young men married older women and old men married young women and everyone slept with everyone. There were no rules anymore. Potter had been married for 15 years. Now he was free, but free to do what, exactly?

The barista wasn't there and he was relieved. He took his coffee and sat in the corner, pulled out his notebook and made a few notes about panhandling. He wrote down every detail about the growling man because he knew that would be the starting point of his first column. It was almost always better to begin in the middle of the scene, and avoid a long-winded introduction or setup that would just bore the reader. People were too busy now for introductions. You had to grab them right off the bat, in the first sentence. But what would the perfect first sentence be? Potter thought about that as he sipped his coffee slowly. He would have to slow down, of course. He had nothing to do now except be homeless, which he assumed to mean a lot of time wandering the streets, panhandling, looking for a safe place to sleep, collecting bottles and beer cans

to make money, and of course talking to his fellow homeless. He had no idea what kind of conversation you would have with a homeless person if that person were crazy, like the growling man. Potter felt a sudden wave of despair sweep over him. What was he doing? This would never work.

He heard a loud voice and looked up. One of the reporters from the paper was walking in. Myers was the A list court reporter. She travelled everywhere in the country to cover sensational trials and her stories were the most popular in the paper. She was 36 and had two university degrees and was married to a 40-year-old sociology professor at the U of T who wrote freelance pieces for the New York Times. As hard as he had tried, Potter could not locate a single flaw in Myers, or her stories, her husband or her marriage. She was perfect. As she came closer, he put his head down so she wouldn't recognize him. He pushed his notebook under arm and slid the pen back into a pocket of his jeans. As she passed he detected just the slightest hint of perfume. She was talking about an upcoming trial involving a wealthy real estate agent charged with the murder of his wife and girlfriend, both found strangled to death in the garage of his mansion north of the city. He's a guilty prick, she was saying. I talked to a couple of former business associates. Cheated them on commissions. They hate his guts.

Potter waited until Myers and her friend had left, and then stuffed the notebook back into his jeans and walked out to the street again. He'd left the shopping cart next to the door, so he could keep an eye on it. He didn't want someone to rip it off. How would he sleep outside without a sleeping bag? He couldn't. He grabbed the handle of the cart and headed north again, up Yonge. For the rest of the day he walked around the city. When he got tired, he sat down on a bench and made notes. He tried panhandling

outside the Tiffany's on Bloor but a cop came along and asked him for ID and he apologized and said he'd left it at home and the cop laughed and told him to move along, which he immediately did. He spent a couple of hours in the reference library, checking his email and reading newspapers. At seven o'clock he went into a Subway and bought a six-inch veggie sandwich and then walked over to Yorkville and sat on a bench on Cumberland and ate the sandwich as he watched young trendies step into bars and restaurants, their voices loud and exaggerated the way young people's so often are. He realized he hadn't spoken to anyone all day and he also realized he was extremely tired. How many miles had he walked? He did a rough calculation in his notebook and figured he'd walked at least seven miles between 9 am and 5 pm. All in a day's work, he wrote, but less than two bucks to show for it.

He sat on the bench for a long time, until well after darkness fell. He watched as the sky above the city slowly darkened into deeper blues and then the lights came on, one by one, and the shops lit up and then suddenly, as though by magical transformation, the night-time version of the city appeared. Potter had never watched this happen before. The city looked completely different at night. Sleeker, sexier, more mysterious, more glamorous, yes, but also more dangerous, much more dangerous. He got up and walked for a while, thought about having a coffee because he still had a twenty stashed in his back pocket, but then he changed his mind and headed towards the Rosedale ravine.

The path led down, away from a street filled with expensive houses and luxury cars, into the ravine. There were lights at first, and then no lights at all. Far ahead, a two-lane road cut through the ravine. Potter could see the intermittent flash of

headlights as they came around a corner and then moved off to the west. He stepped off the path and crossed a short strip of grass to where the trees began. He found a chain link fence and followed it, looking for a spot that would shelter him between the fence and the trees. He finally found a spot fifty or sixty yards along. On the other side of the fence he could see into someone's backyard, although a line of fir trees across the width of the yard blocked most of the light from the house. There were two trees side by side, and a fallen log of some kind in the middle, so Potter was able to lay his sleeping bag down beside the log and feel some sense of shelter even though he was sleeping outside, in a ravine, in the middle of the city. He could hear cars and traffic. The ground was very hard. A couple of rocks cut into his back, so he got up again and pushed them away and put the sleeping bag down again and used the sweater as a pillow and tried to sleep. He was very tired. Would animals attack him in his sleep? He didn't think so. Surely there wasn't anything more ferocious in a ravine than a hungry racoon, and he knew coyotes didn't attack humans.

He dozed on and off for a few hours, waking whenever he heard a noise, the blare of a horn, the cry of a bird, a slamming door, a distant fire truck. Why was the city so noisy at night? The night was warm and the sleeping bag was too heavy, and so he woke up at dawn bathed in his own sweat. His back ached. He got up slowly and then folded the sleeping bag and pushed it down into the shopping cart. He went to a coffee shop for a muffin and coffee. When he asked to use the bathroom, the waitress didn't smile but she didn't shake her head either and he wondered how long that would last. Soon enough he would be too filthy or have no money. How was he going to make

money? At the sink, he washed his face twice, slowly, and his hands three times. He ran a comb through his hair and massaged his beard. The hair was itchy already.

He spent the day wandering the city again. He sat on the sidewalk on Queen Street West for a couple of hours displaying a cardboard sign he made saying HOMELESS PLEASE HELP. The young people were friendly enough, but no one gave him money. Disgusted, he got up and threw the sign away, into the wind. It soared up into the air then landed on the back of the head of a very tall man who turned out to be a German tourist. Potter rushed over to apologize and the man, not angry at all, read the sign and asked Potter why he was homeless. Potter said he'd lost his wife and his job and had a drinking problem and no friends, because he assumed those were the main reasons you became homeless and he realized that some of those things were in fact true. The man looked at him very intently, as though applying some kind of telepathic lie detector, and then reached into his pocket, pulled out a wallet, and to Potter's complete amazement, gave him a five-dollar bill. He said thank-you very much and the man said you're welcome and I hope your life improves. For some reason, Potter said yes sir. The man walked away, quickly, and then disappeared into the streams of shoppers on the street.

By eight o'clock that evening he was completely exhausted. How could doing so little require so much energy? That didn't make sense. He knew where he was but he never when he was. What time was it? The lack of a watch was very disorienting. He was a very punctual person, used to timing and managing the events of his day with great precision, but now, without time, he felt lost. The day had turned into one long amorphous blob of the present, without structure or plan or shape.

He showed up at the shelter just as darkness was falling. There was a line-up. He waited patiently behind a man dressed head to toe in purple and red, with enormous filthy running shoes on his bare feet. The man turned and glared at Potter, shook his head and turned around again. The man behind Potter kept tapping him on the shoulder asking him for a light, each time poking him harder and harder until Potter told him to stop. Got the shakes, the man said, that's all got the shakes. Well alright, said Potter, I understand that but I don't like you poking me in the shoulder. The man said, I need a smoke is all. Potter looked down and saw the man had collected a dozen cigarette butts and was holding them in his left hand. His fingers were stained with nicotine. Potter couldn't remember the last time he'd seen that. I'm Lewis, the man said, L-E-W-I-S, but folks call me Louie so you can call me that too. Potter nodded and introduced himself. The man said, I think you're ok. Potter shrugged.

Once they were inside the building, they had to give their names to a man sitting at a table. They were searched for weapons and reminded that checkout time in the morning was 8 am. Showers were available. Potter and Louie were assigned beds together in a large beige dormitory that smelled of sweat and old clothes and some kind of disinfectant that Potter couldn't identify. The cots were very narrow. There were no lockers, so Potter stuffed his remaining money, a twenty dollar bill and the five dollar bill from the German tourist, into his underwear, took his jeans and shirt off and piled them at the top of the bed to use as a pillow. He put the sleeping bag and sweater beside his shoes under the bed. He'd had to leave the shopping cart in the hall and assumed it probably wouldn't be there in the morning.

The bedsheets were thin but clean. The cot felt incredibly comfortable compared to the stony ground of the ravine and Potter began to nod off as soon as soon as he tucked the topsheet under his chin. The other men were chatting or murmuring in their beds. Potter couldn't tell if they were talking to themselves or each other. Louie said goodnight, and Potter replied, goodnight, Louie. The lights went off, and a stern voice from somewhere reminded them again that checkout time was 8 am. Potter dozed off, then woke with a start in the darkness. He had no idea what time it was or how long he'd slept. Someone was hovering over him. What is it? he said. I'm just making sure you're ok, Louie said. You know, that you're ok. Of course I'm ok, Potter said. Potter felt scared but at the same time he didn't think Louie would try to hurt him and there was no way he could steal the money nestled safely in his underwear.

In the morning they got up at dawn and took turns in the shower. Potter gave the two bills to Louie and made him promise to give them back. I'll buy you breakfast, he said, and Louie smiled for the first time and Potter saw that most of his teeth were missing. Potter took his shower quickly in a room that reminded him of an old YMCA he'd visited somewhere, with yellow tile walls and beat-up lockers, exposed pipes in the ceiling and a general air of sadness and neglect. A place full of wrinkled and paunchy old men complaining about women and teenagers and the state of the world. But here the water was hot and there was plenty of soap. He stood under the stream for as long as he could. Someone yelled, you're holding up the line, and he moved away. He looked but he also couldn't look at the bodies of the naked men around him. They were mostly skinny and white. Some were scarred, some were deformed and twisted by disease. Everything seemed mismatched—there were old faces on young bodies, and

so many hairy and bearded heads on hairless bodies. The older men were hunched over. Potter couldn't wait to get out, to get away, to get back to the street again.

He bought Louie a proper breakfast as a bribe for his story, and the sad details of his life poured out between sips of coffee and tiny mouthfuls of toast and egg. Louie was the slowest eater Potter had ever seen. He cut his meal up meticulously into small pieces before slowly and carefully lifting each forkful into his mouth. He took a full minute to spread the jam on each section of toast, ensuring that every square inch was covered. Louie was an alcoholic, had been since he was 12 or 13. Two marriages down the tubes. Many many jobs, more than he could remember. Two children, but he had no idea where they were. He didn't know where his ex-wives were. When he made Potter guess his age and Potter said 55? he laughed and said you're off by ten, man, I'd say we're about the same age and I'm only 45 but I knew you'd never get it right.

Potter needed Louie, of course, and Louie didn't seem to mind Potter's company, and asked him very few questions so Potter didn't have to lie to him. Potter didn't really believe he was fooling Louie about being homeless, but what did it matter? The point was to have the experience and then write the story. Then the book.

I'm not fuckin' crazy, you know, Louie said. The waitress gave him a dirty look when she brought Potter the bill. She thinks so. Fuck. I've dealt with her kind before. Showed her who's boss. Reminds me of a wife, you know? Always judging you, always fuckin' judging you. Am I right?

Louie brightened when they were outside. I need air, he said. I just need air. Do you understand me? I need air.

First off, Louie said, you have the wrong kind of cart, so dump it. Fuckin' dump it, OK?

Where?

Louie shrugged. Doesn't matter. Who cares? Leave it here.

Potter took the sleeping bag and sweater out of the cart. Louie said follow me, and the two men walked ten blocks to a supermarket, where Louie told Potter to put a quarter in to free the cart, and Potter did that, and then Louie said let's go. As they were making their getaway, a clerk came out of the store and started yelling at them. Louie broke into a run and Potter followed. They ran and ran until Louie stopped and bent over and said he couldn't run anymore because he had a bad heart and weak legs and too much crap in his lungs. He sat down on the curb to recover, and then pulled out some butts, lit one, and took a few puffs. You should quit, it's not too late, Potter said. Are you fuckin' nuts, Louie said. At my age I'm not quitting nothing.

After Louie recovered, they walked twenty blocks to a neighbourhood where the recycling bins were out on the street in front of tidy middle-class houses. Louie knew which neighbourhoods to hit on which days, and he knew which neighbourhoods offered the best pickings. Beer cans and tetra paks are what you want to focus on, he said. Bottles are too damn noisy, a pain in the ass because they break and then you've got glass all over the damn place. The problem is, these cheap bastards take their own crap to the beer store for the money. They're robbin' us, for chrissakes.

Potter laughed. Louie showed him how to make a fast and clean sweep of the street, grabbing cans out of the plastic bins. Go for the big ones because they're easier to rummage through than the small ones. Obvious, right? Just keep moving, always

keep moving, and always keep an eye out for cops or some dickhead who thinks you're stealing from him and decides to come out and give you a hard time. Now I never stand my ground and fight, although I could of course, I just back away. I stay polite, even though I'm thinking what a fuckin' prick that guy is, giving me a hassle when I'm just trying to make a living.

Louie preferred to do his collecting in the hour before dawn, or the hour after sunset. But seeing as this is a training session, it's OK we're in the light of day, he said. Though we're not making much.

They went to a beer store and cashed in. Louie waited outside while Potter took the empties in and waited as the clerk counted them and then handed him \$10.15. Guy inside? Kinda knows me, Louie said. Let's say, we've had words.

They split the money 50-50. It's barely lunch, Potter said. Lunch are you kidding, Louie said. I need a drink. But what can you buy for five bucks, Potter said. Louie just looked at him. It's what can we buy for ten bucks, right? We're in this together, my friend. Together. Louie slapped him on the shoulder. What were you doing last night, Potter asked him. I woke up and saw you. Oh, Louie said, just looking out for you. He slapped Potter again. Just looking out for you.

We're very pleased, the editor said. They were sitting in the coffee shop at Bloor and Yonge. Potter had never heard the editor use the word *very* before. The paper had given prominent play to his first two pieces, running them on the front page, with a jump to page three. He'd changed the names of everyone, including Louie, but that was the

only concession he'd made. Everything he'd written was true and honest, and every word that appeared in quotation marks was something that someone had said, because he'd made very careful notes and double checked those notes. He didn't want anyone questioning what he'd written as false or exaggerated. He knew the story had book potential. He had to keep living the experience and writing about it and taking more notes and everything would fall into place.

How do you feel? she asked him. He paused, because he wasn't sure how to explain it to her. His skin itched terribly and the pain in his lower back wouldn't go away. He woke up most mornings with a headache and a hangover because he was drinking too much, the cheap wine that Louie favored, but there was no way he could stop drinking now that he'd started again. So in fact he felt lousy. The fresh air high that people talked about had faded after a couple of days, replaced by a constant and implacable fatigue that washed over him all day long.

I'm fine, he said.

You look like shit. But that's the point, after all. Can I get you anything?

No, he said. I'm fine. Really.

Do you really think you can keep this up for three months?

I know I can, he said.

I want you to keep emailing. Every other day.

When I can, he said. There was no way to do anything to schedule now. Surely she could understand that?

Every other day. Please.

When I can. When I can.

He looked outside, distracted by an old man standing on the sidewalk. Louie knew him, had introduced him as a crazy old fucker who'd once sailed around the world and then climbed a mountain and then almost lost a leg in a logging accident and ended up hooked on painkillers and heroin and morphine and a dozen other drugs that Louie rhymed off with precision and glee. The old man recognized Potter and waved and Potter waved back. The old man squinted at the editor and made an obscene gesture at her. She laughed.

Your world, she said. I can't believe this is your world now.

Louie knew all the best places to sleep outside while the weather was still warm. He kept hinting that he'd be heading west when the cold weather arrived in November. He had a friend in Vancouver, a guy who did autobody work and lived in an apartment and didn't mind putting him up from time to time. Another guy owned a fishing boat and let him sleep in the pilothouse so no one would rip off his gear. For now, though, Toronto was fine. They were sitting under a bridge near the Don River. Louie liked cardboard and newspapers when he slept in the open. The cardboard formed the mattress and the newspapers were his security system. Just crumple 'em and spread 'em around and there's no way a fucker can get to you without making a noise, he said.

They were drinking red wine as usual. Three other men and a woman were sitting about fifty feet away and when Louie lit a fire in the trash barrel, they came over. The evenings were getting cooler now and the warmth from the small fire was welcome. Potter had no idea of the time. It could have been 10 pm or 2 am. He was tired but he

didn't want to sleep yet. If there was a way to postpone sleep, he would seek it out. His dreams were confused and disturbing and when he woke up in the morning, he usually felt nauseous and cold and tired.

The woman in the group came over and sat beside him. Her name was Mary. She had a bottle too, and offered him a swig. He took and drank and then realized it wasn't wine, but something else, something vile and poisonous. He spit it out and started to cough. She laughed. Oh, aren't you fussy, she said.

He took a deep breath. Louie handed him the wine bottle and said, here, drink the civilized stuff, not her crap.

Potter took a long deep chug on the bottle and realized he was very drunk and getting drunker. The only solution to this particular problem, that is, his life, was to get very drunk.

The woman was studying his face, so he studied hers. She was drunk and middle aged, like most of the homeless people he'd met. Maybe 50 or 55. Not unattractive. A face that had once been kind or hopeful? Maybe. Now it was just wrinkles and hard lines, her hair thinning on top and mostly gray, matted and roughly cut. No makeup of course, and lines of dirt and grease on the side of her neck. What had she been doing today? Probably dumpster diving, from what Louie said. You could wait until the restaurant tossed their leftovers at 2 am but most folks didn't want to wait that long. And Mary liked the dumpster food.

You're OK, she said. I like your skin. She reached out and touched his cheek.

Making a move already? Louie said. Oh, fuck off, she said. Fuck yourself off, already.

Oh, come on, you want to fuck him.

She touched him again, and then he realized she was coming on to him. She was drunk, but not incoherent. She said she liked his eyes, he had very sensitive eyes. Come with me, she said, and for some reason he never really understood except his own pathetic inability to say no, he stood up and held her hand in his hand and she led him away from the fire and deeper into the darkness.

No one said anything. No one yelled out after them. She took him a few yards along the path that bordered the river and then into the woods. They stopped by a tree. There was cardboard on the ground and couple of blankets. She had another bottle under the blanket and gave it to Potter but he shook his head. She put the bottle down again, and then started to take her clothes off, first the sweater and then the shirt underneath and she smiled at him and he began to take his clothes off.

They fucked under the blankets. He was surprised how hard he was. Half the time with his wife he couldn't even get it up. But now he felt omnipotent and without mercy or tenderness. Who was Mary? No one. Just a cunt. It was so dark he could barely make out her face. Her body was thin and bony, her breasts small and shapeless, but he moved easily in her because she was so wet, and he was surprised by the intensity of her lust, her heavy panting in his ear. When she went on top, she moved so hard and fast he thought his cock was going to break off. Yes he was drunk, but he was still aware of her hips grinding on his, he still heard every moan and pant she made as he urged her to fuck him harder and faster. She made so much noise he put his hand over her mouth. He thought of his ex-wife, who would never have fucked him on the ground in the woods in the middle of the night, not in a million years or even

for a million dollars. Her modest sighs of completion were sometimes so modest he had to inquire whether she'd come or not. And then she'd resented his question, of course.

Mary bit into his finger. He took his hand away. What the fuck are you doing, he said. I can't breathe, she said.

Sorry, he said. She leaned down, kissed him roughly on the lips. It's alright, love, she said. It's alright now.

Then it was over. He came, but he stayed hard, and then she came, biting his ear and panting with her alcohol breath into the side of his face. She rolled back onto the cardboard and without a word pulled the blanket around her and went to sleep. He didn't know whether to stay or get up and put his clothes on. When she started to snore, he said fuck because he knew he couldn't sleep there and he got up and put his clothes on.

The fire had been doused. Louie was alone on his mattress of cardboard. I want to sleep, Potter said. Right now.

They slept side by side. Potter still had his sleeping bag. He arranged half of it to cover Louie.

She's a firecracker once she gets going, Louie said.

Potter said nothing. He wanted to sleep.

Can't blame a man for wanting it. Even you. No chance of bastards. She's too old for that. I always fucking hated safes.

Go to sleep, Potter said.

Thing is, she used to shoot. So you never know.

Never know what? Potter said.

AIDS. She might have it.

Fuck, Potter said.

Louie laughed. Know how you screw a fat woman?

No.

Roll 'er in flour and look for the wet spot, Louie said and laughed again. Anyways.

If you got it, I got it, we all got it.

Potter had realized on the second day of his friendship with Louie that the man was capable of carrying on both sides of a conversation and didn't require any active participation on his part. This seemed to be true of most of the homeless people he encountered. There might a question or two, what's your name, where're you from, have you got any cigs or money or a match, but no one cared about what he had to say. In a strange way, he found this liberating. He could spend many hours with Louie listening to him rattle on about the tragedies of his life or the brutal injustices perpetrated by women in this world, and he rarely had to say a word. When he did, Louie never judged what he said or tried to say something smarter or more clever. There were arguments and fights, of course. He once saw Louie punch a man in the nose and nearly break his own wrist in the process. But Potter knew he could drift along and listen and observe and no one cared, no one needed his input or his feedback or his comments or his criticism. He could just observe. Wasn't this the point of the story?

Louie sometimes disappeared for a day or two. Potter would spent half the day feverishly gathering cans and bottles and then hide the money in the woods near the

river the way Louie had showed him. He was self sufficient now, proud that he could hold his own against the best and most experienced collectors. He usually slept in shelters when he was alone because the woods and the darkness still scared him. The people didn't scare him as much as the darkness did. The people were drunk or crazy or stoned, but no one had tried to hurt him. Louie picked fights because he liked to fight. He called it a blood rush and better than sex because it lasted longer and you did it in public and it proved you were a man to other men and set your place in the order of things, from strongest to weakest. Sex is like Chink food, he said, half an hour and you're hungry again. When Louie disappeared one day Potter went to the shelter but the line was too long and he got tired of waiting. So he went back to the river, near his money stash. He saw a few familiar faces and felt reassured that he wouldn't be completely alone for the night. He spread his sleeping bag on the cardboard. He forgot to spread newspapers as Louie had taught him, but thinking about it later decided it wouldn't have made any difference anyways. Two men woke him by kicking him in the ass and saying, Get up, get the fuck up you fucker. He couldn't see who they were because it was too dark and what difference would that have made? He stood up and then they said turn out your pockets and so he gave them fifty cents, his ball point pen, a stick of gum, two boxes of matches, two condoms he'd stolen from a drug store and a couple of cigarette butts he was saving for Louie. What's that, one of the men said, and Potter said, just a notebook, and the man said hand it over. Potter said You don't want that, and the man said, Did we ask your fucking opinion? He took the notebook from Potter and held it in his hand. Potter said Please, I need it. The man laughed and pushed him hard, and Potter fell backwards, and went down hard, as though he'd been

punched, the cardboard barely breaking his fall. The man tore a page from the notebook and lit it with the matches and dropped it on Potter, who swatted it away with his hand and then rolled on top of it to smother flame. The man said get up and Potter said no, please, and then both men started to kick him. Potter rolled into a ball and covered his head with his hands and waited for it to stop.

In the morning the clearing was deserted. There was no sun, just heavy gray clouds in a dim sky and the constant thrum of traffic coming down the parkway. He was very sore. He got up slowly. This is completely insane, he thought. I can't do this anymore. I have to quit, I have to give up. I might have AIDS, for christsakes. Without the notebook I have no book. Without the notebook, I have nothing.

He hobbled along for a few yards, then sat down and rested. Then he got up again and found his cash stash and took a couple of bills from it. He walked to Sherbourne and got a cheap coffee and kept walking until he got to Yonge and then he turned south to the Starbucks at King where he sat outside in an empty chair and watched the people streaming to work. He felt immensely sorry for himself. He felt that he knew everyone passing by and no one knew him. He'd written their stories, over and over. He knew their faces and where they were from, he knew their public and private lives, he knew their secrets, their hopes and dreams, their crushing disappointments, their momentary triumphs, their rage and their joy, their love and hate. He knew all of these things about them, but they knew nothing about him, nothing at all. He kept thinking this thought over and over, until the coffee cup was empty. He threw it on the sidewalk. A man in a suit gave him a dirty look. He shook his head. He put his head in his hands. He began to cry. Then a voice said, Sir you'll have to move along. He said,

What? Sir, you'll have to move along. You're not a paying customer, are you. He said, No, only a human being. I'm sorry, the boy said, for he was only a boy from what Potter could see. He was having trouble seeing, for some reason. He got up. He began to walk away. Everything seemed blurry. He stopped, turned around and looked back. The boy had risen into the air and was extending his arms towards Potter like an angel. Potter blinked and blinked again. The boy was gone.

I'm worried about you, the editor said. You haven't filed for a week. You look like hell.

I got beat up last night, he said.

Alright, she said. This is the end of it. Right now.

No.

What do you mean, no?

I mean no.

This is my story.

Not exactly, she said.

If you won't run it, I'll take it somewhere else.

Don't be ridiculous. You can't do that. You're staff. We own the story.

Potter said nothing.

She touched his hand. She had never done that before.

Listen, be reasonable, she said. You've been out too long. You need to come in.

You've done brilliant work. We're pleased.

But it's only four weeks. It's not enough.

You have to stop doing this.

He didn't want to stop. Why couldn't she understand that? Fuck you, he said softly.

What did you say?

He pulled his hand away and started to drum his fingers on the countertop. He could get away, he knew that. She tried to put her hand on his hand again and he pulled away and got up.

I have to go.

We'll bring you in, she said.

He laughed. Fucking hell you will!

Now he could say it. Fuck you very much.

What?

You heard me. Goodbye.

He ran out.

Without the notebook he couldn't remember his library card number and PIN and without those two numbers he couldn't get to the library computer to put his thoughts down on the page and email them to himself. There was no way the library would give him a new card because you needed proof of address and he sure as hell didn't have that. He could see the way security guards kept an eye on him. Was that the very worst part of it? The way people looked at you, or the way they didn't look at all. Not just the invisibility of an average-looking middle aged man, but the complete and total invisibility

of being a filthy bum. That's was he was, a bum. He'd thought of jumping a freight and riding out west, but he had no idea where the freight-yards were. Louie said it was very hard to jump up if the train was moving, and if the train wasn't moving, chances were you had the wrong train. How could you possible know which trains were going west and which trains were going east, for example. Potter agreed that was a major problem.

The day after he told his editor to fuck off he tried to sit in the library for a few hours to collect his thoughts. He usually started a library visit by reading the three local papers front to back, but he found the stories on the front page of the first paper so annoying that he couldn't continue. He went upstairs to a table at the back of the building, near a window overlooking trees and a greenspace and tried to focus on a trashy celebrity magazine but that didn't work either. He stared at the trees and thought about Mary and how he had fucked her that night and whether he would die of AIDS. He watched the branches move in the wind and imagined the sound they made because he knew that sound so well now. The simple fact was that he liked being outside. He liked it. Maybe he loved it. He got up from the table and went back out into the street.

The cop stopped him on Queen Street. He wasn't panhandling, he wasn't bothering anyone, he wasn't drunk and he certainly wasn't stoned. He'd made it a firm rule not to do drugs, even when they were offered for free. Louie had said no drugs, and Louie was right about that. No, the cop just stopped him, calling him Buddy, which he didn't particularly like, but of course that was not the sort of thing you pointed out to a cop. He was short and dark skinned and very young, trying hard to impress people with his

authority, Potter thought. Cops did that. It was part of being a cop. The way they occupied space on the sidewalk. Trying to be bigger than they really were. The cop said, hey, Buddy, slow down, I need to ask you something.

Potter stopped walking. The cop was showing him something.

Know this guy?

What?

Do you know this guy?

What guy?

In the picture!

Potter tried to focus on the picture. It wasn't big enough. He couldn't see it very clearly, for some reason. He'd had trouble with his eyes since the beating. He blinked a few times and tried to focus.

There was a face. A man's face. He looked familiar. A relative maybe? Someone he'd met? He'd met a lot of people. He didn't have many relatives. One of the men who'd beaten him up? Maybe. He couldn't tell. The beard looked funny, like it was painted on.

No. Nope. Don't know 'em.

Are you sure? the cop said. He's a reporter.

Potter sighed loudly. I am completely goddamn sure.

The cop stared at him.

Can I go now, Potter asked. The cop nodded. Potter walked away. When he saw the cop was gone, he sat down on the sidewalk, with his back against the building, and inspected the dirt under his fingernails. He inspected each nail carefully. Time for a

shower, he knew that. He thought about the picture again. Of course. He was the man. He laughed. They wanted him. He laughed again. They would never catch him. He had to write the book and then they could catch him.

Louie came back in October with no explanation of where he'd been. Potter didn't care, although he was happy to see his friend again. Now when they slept together on cold nights, Louie put his arm around Potter, only in a friendly way, of course, because he wasn't queer, and they kept warm together. They spent more nights in the shelter and put up with the stupid rules and the petty harassments and the constant threat of some guy ripping you off. You were no safer outside, but at least you could pick your own sleeping spot, make your own rules, take your own chances. Louie said he was going to teach Potter how to box because he obviously needed help defending himself. Potter had told him everything, and he realized the telling of it, including the story about his marriage and how his life had fallen apart and never really been put back together, was a good thing. Telling was a good thing. Truer than writing. It was harder to make things up when you shared your deepest thoughts and feelings with a friend who never judged you. Writers make things up at the drop of a hat. What a bunch of con artists!

Potter decided one morning that he had a mission, and his mission was to save the planet one beer can at a time. Louie laughed, and announced plans to go to Vancouver. Didn't Potter want to come? No, he said, my place is here, I have an entire fucking city to clean up. Louie laughed again. You'll fuckin' freeze in the winter. Your nuts will turn

blue, shrivel and fall off. Then you won't be able to fuck Mary. No nuts, hard dick. No, said Potter, I'll survive. I'll make it.

They said goodbye at the corner of Bay and College. No particular reason to be there. Potter was headed downtown because he had a plan for a new panhandling sign that he was sure would work like the blazes with those rich pricks who worked in the banks, and Louie had scammed some money off an old friend and was taking the bus to Sudbury, where he had friends to stay with. Potter gave him some money from the stash. He'd been working very hard the past two weeks and could spare a \$20 bill for his friend.

Louie ran against the light and almost got hit by a black Honda driven by a cranky-looking old guy in a leather jacket. Louie stood on the other side of Bay and waved at Potter, who was thinking that a leather jacket would be an excellent investment for the winter. Where could he find one? He thought about that for a second, as he was waving at Louie, and then some more cars went by and when he looked again, Louie was gone. Not just hidden, or out of sight but gone. As though he had never existed. Potter thought about that for a second, but the thought didn't linger. The words in his mind died away almost as quickly as they appeared. He looked down the long drab corridor of Bay Street, then up at the darkening gray sky, then down at a filthy scrap of newspaper on the sidewalk in front of him. He kicked it away. Filthy streets. He jammed his hands into his pockets because it was cold and started to walk again, quickly, forgetting Louie, already planning the words on the cardboard, imagining coins falling into his cap and then hot soup in his belly.