

My Homeless Neighbors: Conversations from the Streets of San Francisco

By Lynn Burnett.

Stories written between 2016 and 2020.

Introduction

The following stories are about my interactions with the chronically homeless people in my neighborhood in San Francisco. For seven years, I lived in the South of Market district, at 10th and Folsom. My home was one block away from the 11th Street strip of bars and clubs, and right at the heart of Folsom's BDSM and gay leather bar scenes. It was also just a few blocks away from City Hall, and during my time there, I watched the headquarters for Twitter, Airbnb, and Uber move within blocks of my home. This area was also home to a large population of people who lived on the streets, many of whom I saw on an almost daily basis as I walked to wherever my destination happened to be. Many of them had lived there far longer than I. Some of them I came to know and care for, at least in some small way. Others I simply observed, with a range of emotion, over the years; and some, I encountered in a single but memorable moment. If this handful of stories can help humanize them in some small way, I'll be happy.

Ice Cream

One night I was with a friend in Hayes Valley, and an especially downtrodden looking homeless man approached us. He had no teeth, so he was having trouble finding food he could eat. We decided to take him out to ice cream, and as we walked he told us brutal stories in a strangely high-pitched, timid voice. "I knew the kid was new to the city, because he still wore his backpack everywhere he went. I told him to hide that backpack or he would get attacked! One day someone hit him on the head with a bat and took his bag. I screamed for help but no one would listen to me." What he meant was that no one paid attention to his screams because he was a filthy looking homeless man.

When we got to the ice cream shop, I worried that the people inside might be disgusted by him. He was extremely dirty and his skin was in rough shape. So I almost said, "wait outside, I'll get it for you." Which made me feel cruel; and my first reaction to feeling my own cruelty was to suppress that feeling. I could feel my own suppression of something I didn't want to face, and realized that I lacked the basic courage to walk in with him, when what I really needed to do was be ready to defend him if people opposed his presence. So as we all walked in, I felt a little fierce, ready to stand up to anyone who demeaned him.

Homelessness becomes a form of segregation. This man – this aged beyond his years, mentally disabled, dirty, defeated, meek and beaten man – had every right to stand there with us, conversing with us, ordering food with us, just like any other human being. I felt that it morally and spiritually empowered us all to be in that ice cream shop together, me in my dress shirt, him in his rags, just talking with one another as humans. As we talked I imagined who he would be if he wasn't homeless: a sweet old man with an intellectual disability. In which case the people at the ice cream shop would be very kind and helpful to him rather than looking at him with disgust. But take that same man who we would all be so kind to and strip away all of his support, and that man quickly becomes beaten down by the world; becomes sick and dirty and tired and angry... and the world now treats him not as a human being, but a disgusting creature. It is only once he is badly hurt and wounded that it becomes socially acceptable to completely dehumanize him; to not even look at him or listen to him when he speaks. I have noticed time and again that people become most capable of treating others cruelly if they are already being treated cruelly... and whenever forms of cruelty abound it is far too easy for it to start to feel natural, and for otherwise goodhearted people to become unconscious of it.

“Aye, give me money!”

Yesterday when the sun was setting I was walking down 11th Street and I saw Modesto, the homeless Cuban refugee who sweeps the streets and often stands in a certain doorway for hours at a time watching the world go by. I said, “Aye, Modesto!” and he said, “Aye, give me money!” and started cracking up, because he knows I'll never give him any money. He said, “Today's my 95th birthday!” and I said, “No! You can't be a day over 90!” and we both laughed. I asked, “How old are you really?” and he said, “Really! 95! Really! Look on the internet; Modesto; 95!” A cop car drove by slowly with the window down and Modesto pulled out a bottle of Tequila and waved it, yelling, “Heeeeyyy, I have Tequila for you! Come and get my tequila you fucking cop!” I laughed and said, “Ah, I see, you supply the cops with their tequila, that's why they're always over here!” Modesto looked at the ground grumbling and said “Motherfuckers always take my fucking tequila.” “Poor, poor Modesto,” I said. “Poor Modesto,” he sighed. “Modesto needs his Tequila!” He looked me dead in the eye and said: “When I was a baby...” he paused for effect and grinned... “I drank Tequila straight from my mother's titties!” He howled with laughter and started dancing around chanting, “straight from the titties; straight from the titties...” His ridiculous antics made me laugh so hard that I cried. Then he sighed: “Ah, I've been an alcoholic all my life.”

I looked up at the clouds; they were soft and filled with brilliant color. I said, “The sky is beautiful Modesto.” He said, “Yes, very peaceful.” And then it immediately started raining and he stepped back into the doorframe from which he watches the world. I said, “Hey, where's the blanket I gave you last week?” He said, “Aye, I went

to the hospital.” He rolls up his sleeve and shows me he’s still wearing the hospital bracelet. “I came out and, everything... gone.” “I don’t have any more, if I get some I’ll bring one over.” “Thank you, thank you,” he says. “Happy 95th birthday,” I said as I began to walk away. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned at me: “Aye, give me money...?”

The Drummer and the Child

I was walking with an old, dear friend through Fisherman’s Wharf. It was already dark outside, but the weekend crowds were still thick. The low-riders were still parading; the street performers were hustling. And there was a little Latino kid, sitting on a bucket, looking cold, tapping on a drum, with a little coffee can in front of him for cash. He couldn’t play, but just tapped on the drum, and the crowds, seeing this poor desolate child, felt sympathy and put a few dollars in the can. My friend and I looked to each other, and we both had the same thought... we wondered if another homeless person was using this kid to make some cash for themselves. And so we sat down on a bench to see what would happen. After ten minutes, a Black man wearing some beautiful Kente cloth walked up to the child and the child stopped drumming. The man took all the bills from the jar and handed them to the child; who shoved the money into their pocket. He then took off his jacket and wrapped it around the child, who walked a little ways away to sit on some steps to watch this incredible drummer, who, despite his immense talent, received no money from the crowd.

Perhaps this man was controlling the child and would later take the money that the child could make, and that he could not. But after watching him, both my friend and I thought it was much more likely that the man was helping a homeless child by letting the child play his drum while he was taking a break. We walked over to him and dropped some money in the can; he smiled a broad; warm smile at us and continued to play.

Earl and Wardi

I was walking home late at night and a man came limping towards me. He was wearing dirty sweatpants that were far too large and had a huge sweater and a hoodie pulled down over his face; but although I couldn’t see him there was something familiar about this figure. As I got closer I noticed some white dreadlocks under the hoodie and I said, “Earl?! Is that you?!”

A ragged and downtrodden Earl looked up. Earl’s a homeless man in his mid-60s; a Black man from the South who seems to have had some irreparable break with his family after he committed some crime decades ago which he’s never wanted to

discuss. He's been homeless since he got out of jail twenty years ago. Earl works his territory; gets good food from a couple local restaurants in exchange for taking out their trash and recycling and sweeping up. He's known for giving away little antiques and interesting memorabilia as gifts; he finds them in the trash and cleans them up and hauls them around in his cart. He's a very spiritual man; constantly dropping aphorisms that his grandmother used to tell him. He'll often shake his head slowly, smile, and say: "My grandma used to tell me..." And it will always be remarkable what she used to tell him. Once he told me, "My grandma learned that lesson from her grandma who was a slave. It applied to them, and it applies to us today." The wise sayings he shared always struck me, but I never wrote them down after speaking with him and they escape my memory.

Earl and I had developed a connection after I passed him on the street one day. He was lying on the ground vomiting blood, with his face lying in his own vomit. Dozens of people were just walking by not noticing; trying not to notice; pretending not to notice. I kneeled down and said, "Brother, do you need some help?" He looked up at me; his eyes were blood red; and he said "Can you call an ambulance?" I waited for the ambulance to come and rushed off because I was late for something. A week later I was walking down the street and he saw me and said, "Hey, you saved my life." Earl and I developed a connection after that.

When he came limping towards me I hadn't seen him for months. I had started to wonder if he had passed on. So I was excited to see him; and worried: he had never limped before, he was always well put together and always had a calm, clear look in his eyes. But now he looked awful. He was dirty, dazed and confused... he told me he had had a stroke and had been in a hospital for ninety days. I said, "Earl, let me know if I can help you in some way." He thought for a moment and said, "Take me to that church?"

Earl was referring to the street sermons given in the Bayview by a bouncer we both knew named Wardi. Wardi had a huge heart; he knew the various homeless folks that had staked out their territory in the blocks around a bar called The Foundry at 10th and Folsom where Wardi worked. Wardi had a special soft spot for Earl because they were both very spiritual, humble, Black Christian men who would swap stories about lessons they learned from their elders. One day they were talking about the Bible and Wardi told Earl about a section of scripture that had changed his life. Shortly after that, Earl was rummaging through some furniture that had been abandoned in some back ally, and he found that very same Biblical verse in a beautiful picture frame leaning against the wall. Earl had given this framed verse to Wardi, who saw Earl finding it as more than a coincidence and put it up in his living room. It was after hearing this story from Earl that I introduced myself to Wardi and thanked him for his generous spirit, and from then on whenever I walked past the bar where Wardi worked the door I would chat with him. He told me that he gave street sermons and that I should bring Earl; when I mentioned this to Earl he was enormously excited. But then Earl had disappeared.

I took a deep breath. "Earl," I said, "Wardi passed." Earl's breath left him. "What?" "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but it's true. He had a heart attack." Earl whispered, "No. No." We were quiet for some time. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it. He didn't smoke. He didn't drink. He was as strong as an ox!" "I know. I'm sorry Earl."

Usually when Earl and I talked, at some point in the conversation, he would look up at the sky and say, "Every morning when I wake up and see the sky is still above me, I tell myself, 'I am blessed today.'" Now, he looked up at the sky. But he didn't say that. "Listen," I said, "Why don't I take you to another church?" Earl said he would like that. He didn't have a phone anymore but he told me where he was camping out and I told him I would come find him. I went there a few times and there was no sign of him. I never saw Earl again.

A Chant for Survival

Once I was walking up to my house, and right outside was a homeless man pounding his chest, swaying back and forth, and rhythmically chanting in a big, booming voice. He was so loud, that when I went inside I could hear his voice throughout the entire house. Thirty minutes passed and he was still at it. My roommate joined me in the kitchen, and we laughed at the absurdity of the moment: she said, "At least he sounds happy!"

I left the house shortly after that. The man saw that I was coming out from the house he had been chanting in front of for a long time, and when I looked at him – without saying a thing – his body collapsed, almost as if he suddenly had no bones. He curled up on the ground, crying, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I know I'm being so loud! I'm sorry!" I said, "No, no! It's no problem! Yes, we can hear you inside; but it's nothing to worry about."

He stood back up and told me that he knows he looks crazy, chanting and pounding his chest. He told me he was trying to quit heroin, and that it was killing him. He told me that when he felt that he just couldn't take it anymore, and was about to break down and use again, that he found the most effective thing was just to start chanting and dancing. He told me once again that he knew how crazy he looked: but he had a reason for doing what he was doing. That guy helped me that day; he gave me a much-needed reminder that people do what they do for reasons I can't see. It's something that I know intellectually, but I constantly catch myself making assumptions and judgments – like "this guy's just crazy" – and it always feels liberating when I can break a little more free from that part of myself that thinks I know things that I don't.

A week later, I was walking down the street, and there was a homeless man hopping from one foot to the next. And instead of just assuming he was crazy, I wondered if there was some reason for his hopping. As I passed him, I looked at his feet: they

looked like they were rotting. He probably shifted from foot to foot because it was so painful to have any pressure on those feet.

Refusing the Blanket

I was walking down the street one night and a block from my house I passed an elderly woman who was lying on the sidewalk snoring. It was cold and the fog was rolling in; she was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and no shoes. I had dozens of extra blankets at my house because people would drop them off there for me to hand out to homeless folks, and Mills College had recently let me take a whole carload of blankets that students had left behind when school got out. However, I was running late for a drink with a friend, and I told myself, "I'll just get her a blanket afterward." I kept walking but I felt ashamed. As I passed my house, I was fully prepared to just let her lie there even though it would only take three minutes of my time to keep her warm.

"What the hell am I doing," I thought to myself. I ran up and grabbed two blankets and went back to her. As I put a blanket over her she woke up. If someone's sleeping on the street and you just throw a blanket over them, it can freak them out sometimes because they don't know what's happening at first. I've done this dozens of times and have watched a lot of people shift from being startled out of their sleep to feeling grateful, or at least relieved, within the span of a few seconds. But this woman looked at me and shrieked with all her might: "I ain't a homeless!"

I wasn't sure how to react. She screamed again, "I ain't no fuckin' homeless!" I got my wits together and said, "No, no, of course not ma'am. But you looked cold." "I AIN'T NO FUCKIN' HOMELESS!!!" "Ok, ok... my apologies ma'am. My apologies." She had hurled off the blankets; I folded them back up and started walking away. After a few steps I looked back. She had already laid back down, her head on the cement. I put the blankets down a few feet away from her. I figured maybe she'd wake up at some point, and if they were just there maybe she'd use them; or if someone else wandered along who needed them and who therefore took them; that was fine too.

I had that drink with my friend, and as I was walking back home I decided to go an extra block and just see if she had used them. I walked on the other side of the street because I didn't want to antagonize her. By now it was two hours later, past midnight. She was sitting straight up, staring at the blankets just a few feet away from her.

Mary

One day I was walking down Folsom Street, and I was thinking about how I hadn't seen my old, frail homeless friend Mary for a long time. When one of my homeless friends disappears, I can't help but wonder if they've died, and I was just wondering if Mary had passed on when I saw her. She was leaning against her old haunt: Powerhouse bar, a gay leather club and cruising space. Mary loved chatting with the queens and the burly, bare-chested leather-clad studs who frequented the space and had come to know her over the years. She would hang out there at all times of day and night and was always clearly happy and energized when it opened. I always appreciated the folks at Powerhouse for being sweet to Mary.

Mary looked different. She had always been toothpick-skinny but she was somehow skinnier. Her eyes were somehow bigger. She was fidgeting madly with her hands and the expression on her face looked like she was about to fall completely apart. When I said hello she started trembling and her eyes filled with tears. She told me she had been hospitalized and diagnosed with cancer and was going to be going back in a week and would be starting chemotherapy. "Oh Mary!" I said. I gave her a big hug. I'd been walking past Mary and chatting with her on the street for years and had never touched her before. This frail, old woman started sobbing in my arms. "Will you come visit me?" she asked. "Yes. Absolutely," I said.

Mary told me when and where I could visit her. And I told myself I would go. I didn't. I had other plans that I could have cancelled but I didn't. I'm not sure Mary had anyone who truly cared enough to go and see her. Maybe some of the guys from Powerhouse did. I'd like to think so. But I wouldn't be surprised if nobody went to see Mary. When I think of all the ways I'd like to grow as a human being... I'd like to be the kind of person who would cancel a date and take the risk of disappointing someone I was attracted to go see Mary. Who would reschedule a meeting and maybe take the risk of appearing unprofessional so a homeless woman wouldn't have to die totally alone. It seems easy, but apparently I'm still not there yet.

I did see Mary again. Months had passed, and once again, I was imagining she had died when I saw her in an area I'd never seen her before... on the corner at 6th and Mission. Even from across the street I could see the layer of grime on her face: Mary had never been so dirty before. Something was off. Her entire face was hollow. I thought about crossing the street to check in on her but it looked like she was in the process of scoring something on the corner. I wondered if she had started using more to escape the pains of cancer and chemo. Her eyes met mine and she quickly twisted her head away. That was the last time I saw her.

"Like a Dog"

I had a difficult financial weekend. I was driving for Uber, and all Friday, Saturday and Sunday was brutally slow... sometimes waiting twenty or even thirty minutes between rides. It was maddening, but it was the end of the month and I was behind on the bills. I kinda broke down after working so hard and making so little, especially when I really needed it, and I went out dancing by myself to blow off some steam. There was hardly anyone on the dance floor, but I got wasted and danced my ass off anyway.

I took a break from dancing and went outside to walk around the streets, and ran into Modesto. I told him I was depressed and he offered me a cigarette. I sat down with him and we smoked for a while. It was around 1AM; he asked me if I would buy him a cup of coffee. I said sure. The only place serving coffee at that hour was the club where I had just been dancing, so we walked over there together. He was talking about how after the Cuban Revolution, he had been thrown in prison for four years; and that when he got out he rowed a boat to Florida. He got married, and everything seemed fine for a while. But when he got divorced, he gave his house over to his ex-wife, and he just started wandering around... Texas, Arkansas, Seattle. Along the way he felt increasingly lonely and isolated... and then broken, and he developed a drug addiction to avoid the pain and he ended up homeless. As we approached the club, he told me that a few weeks ago he had asked a regular at the club if he would buy him a bagel. The guy said no, and Modesto gave him five bucks. I asked, "If you had five bucks, why didn't you buy the bagel yourself?" He mumbled something. I said, "They wouldn't let you in?" He nodded. He then said, "That guy... he got me the bagel but no change. And instead of handing it to me he put it on the ground in front of me like a dog."

That hit me. When we approached the club, the guy who had put the bagel on the ground was outside smoking. Modesto said, "That's him..." He shook his head, again saying, "He put the bagel on the ground." "That guy?" I asked, and Modesto nodded. I said, "I'll be right back with your coffee."

The guy was talking with a group of friends when I walked up to him and said, "You know that guy over there?" The group stopped talking and looked at me. I said, "He's a refugee... risked his life getting here and then lost everything. He's been to hell and back." I pulled out five dollars: "Look, my friend just told me that once he gave someone five dollars for a bagel and then instead of handing it to him like a human being they put it on the ground in front of him like he was a dog... I'm hoping someone other than me can treat him with dignity tonight... If I give you five dollars can you hand him a coffee and a bagel? That would mean a lot to him." The guy bought the coffee and the bagel, and put it in Modesto's hands, instead of laying it on the ground in front of him like a dog.

Blowing Bubbles

I was walking down Eighth Street and ran into one of the ministers at the church I'd been going to. As we talked, a homeless woman hobbled up to us and said, "Can you help me?" We told her that we couldn't help with anything right now. Instead of moving on, she asked again, and again, and again. I told her I would come and chat with her after we finished our conversation. She started sobbing: "No you won't! No you won't!" She was frail, mentally disabled, and seemed like a fearful child.

She returned to where she had been sitting before. I finished the conversation and went to talk with her. She asked if I would buy her some food, and I said sure. We walked a few blocks together, and I kept asking, "How about here?" as we passed different food markets, burger joints, and sandwich shops. And she kept saying, "No! Not there." Finally, I said "Look, I have to get going... if you don't want anything on this next block, I have to leave." She nodded. We passed a dollar store and she wanted to go in. She looked longingly at some blankets hanging behind the cash register and asked, "Can I have a blanket?" The blankets in the dollar store were twenty dollars. I said, "I can bring you a blanket. There's no need to pay for blankets." She kept looking, and suddenly broke into laughter, grabbing some bubble mixture for blowing bubbles. It was ninety-nine cents. She asked if I would get it for her. I did. She was gleeful. We walked out. She sat down on the street, smiling, and when I asked her if she still wanted food, she said: "No, I can just go to the shelter." "Ok," I said. "I'm glad we found something you like!" She giggled. I walked half a block, crossed the street, and looked back at her. She was still smiling and blowing bubbles.

"Wada"

I walked past a homeless woman who was shuffling anxiously, staring at the ground and muttering to herself: "Wada; wada; wada." As I passed she looked up at me: "Wada; wada; wada!" I didn't return the look; she was just one of the hundreds of homeless people I was ignoring as I walked through the city that day.

But five steps later I caught myself thinking: "was she muttering *water*?" I took another two steps away from her and began to feel haunted by the thought. I turned back and when I listened to her again it sounded very much like "water, water, water." I said, "ma'am, do you need some water?" And she looked at me with big, clear, desperate eyes and just said "Wada."

She was clearly mentally disabled and not capable of acquiring the basic resources for survival. I said, "Can you stay right here for five minutes? Don't move from here and I'll bring you some water." She stared at me and I asked again, "Can you stay

right here?" She nodded her head. I ran off to the nearest corner store and came back five minutes later with a few bottles of water.

She wasn't there. I walked down the street peeking down some of the alleys and saw her. As I approached her to give her the water a woman came running up to her: "Susan! Oh Susan there you are." This woman, who I'm guessing worked in the area, was also bringing Susan water. She looked at me and then looked back at Susan and smiled: "Susan! Is he bringing you water TOO?" Susan smiled and nodded, and the woman smiled at me, looked back at Susan, and said: "Look at how many friends you have!" Susan beamed. I looked at the woman; my heart opened and joy and gratitude flowed in just knowing that there were people out there like her.

You Stop Wondering If They're Dead

I was walking down Clarion Alley, looking at some of the new murals. It was a nice sunny day. Tourists were taking pictures. There was a man lying on the ground, his head resting on a bag of garbage, his mouth hanging open. I barely took notice of him; I just kept looking at the murals.

A group of French tourists walked past. One of the women noticed the man, screamed, and pointed at him. They all began talking wildly and one of them rushed over to me: "Excuse me... Is he dead?" I said, "I'm not sure. Probably not." "How can you be sure?" They looked deeply troubled. They clearly needed to know if this man was alive or dead.

I walked over to him and pushed his body with my foot. He didn't show any sign of life. The tourists looked horrified; some of them were clinging to each other. I pushed him with my foot again. This time he coughed and sputtered. The woman who had screamed started crying.

I've talked to a number of tourists who have told me, "I love San Francisco. I love it. But I am never, ever coming back here." They are profoundly disturbed by the suffering on the streets that has become totally normalized for so many San Franciscans. I think I was still a teenager when, for the first time, I pushed the body of a homeless person with my foot, wondering if they were dead. Each time, they were disturbed from their drunken coma; their heroin oblivion; their complete collapse into exhaustion. Each time, their perhaps near-death, deeply ill body showed me some sign of life, and I walked on. After checking three or four bodies, I stopped checking. I probably stopped checking if they were dead before I was even twenty-one.

“Aye... Your Friendship.”

When I ran into Modesto the other day, he said “Look!” and held out his hand. He had a gold coin. He said, “I was praying to God! I said, ‘God, I need change!’ And then a bird, ‘Chirp! Chirp!’ And when it chirped; it dropped the coin from the sky!” Modesto has a special look he gives you when he gets to the climax of a story: he leaned forward slowly; his eyes got wide; he held out the gold coin and said, “From HEAVEN.”

I said, “From heaven; or from the bird?” He didn’t care about my question; he just wanted to tell another story: “I was walking along. And I saw a bird! With a gold coin in its mouth! And I got down on my knees. I said, ‘Here, bird!’ And it hopped over! I put my hand out, and when it came close... I snatched the coin from its mouth!” “I like the first version better,” I said. “Is it real gold?” His eyes got wide and he said, “Yesssssss!”

Modesto then looked at me more seriously and said, “Aye, do you have a blanket?” It was the third time in a week he had asked for a blanket, but I had run out and hadn’t gotten any more. I felt a little guilty because I had promised him I would get some. I said, “I’m sorry man, I still don’t have any.” Modesto could tell I felt guilty and said, “Hey, it’s ok, it’s ok... there’s something more important.” “What’s that?” I asked. He looked at me very sincerely and said: “Aye... Your friendship.”

I had been talking with homeless folks in my neighborhood for years – laughing with them, learning about their thoughts and feelings and lives – but this was the only time I had actually been called a friend. I was truly moved. I felt like Modesto was my friend to; although we both knew we had a limited kind of friendship. I would give Modesto blankets, listen to his stories, learn about his life, laugh with him... but I was never going to invite him into my house, not even for a badly needed shower. Apparently, not even the supposed friends of homeless people will invite them in for a brief respite from the streets...

The Leg

I used to walk to the Trader Joes at 9th and Bryant once or twice a week. There’s a freeway exit there, and a man with a gaping wound on his leg used to stand on the corner where the cars getting off the freeway would stop. He would roll up his pant leg and turn so the cars could clearly see his wound. He wouldn’t beg for change – not verbally – he would just stick his leg out and make it impossible for people not to notice his wound. The wound was always freshly opened, and I assumed this man was cutting himself in the hopes that people would see his desperate plight and give him money. I’m not sure this strategy even worked for him. People would pull off the freeway, notice him, and turn away in horror. They would stare intently

ahead, doing all they could to avoid him. I never saw anyone give him money. And yet week after week, month after month, there he was... his wound freshly opened.

Once I was walking through my neighborhood and I heard someone screaming and spun around. There he was, stumbling down the street, his wound looking worse than ever before. He was sobbing "Mama! Mama!" so loudly that you could have heard his wailing at the other end of the block. This man was living a nightmare, and at that moment I felt pulled into it. I felt the warmth leave my body. And yet, by the time I walked into a coffee shop a few minutes later, I had forgotten that I had just witnessed such pain.

At some point I walked past him and the white skin of his leg had turned a puffy, swollen red. A week passed; I walked over to Trader Joe's again. There he was, his leg was now a swollen brownish, purple mess. I stopped on the corner a block away and called 9-11. They said they'd send an ambulance to check on him.

After that I didn't see the guy for a couple months: but one day, there he was again. There was a clear portion of his leg missing and a big scar; I assumed he had to have part of his leg removed. He had opened up another wound on his leg. It didn't take long before his leg started to get discolored again.

All this time, I had never talked to the man. He disturbed me. I would even walk on the other side of the street if I saw he was there. It wasn't so much the wound itself, it was the psychological horror of him keeping it open; it was the way he forced people to look at it. I felt a tension in my body when I walked by him. I didn't know it at the time, but reflecting on it I think that tension was anger. If I could put the tension I felt into words, it would probably sound like: "What the fuck are you doing?! Just fucking STOP!"

One day, I felt sick of avoiding this guy all the time. I walked up to him, looked him in the eye, and just said, "Man, if you keep opening that wound you're going to lose that leg." His eyes grew wide and his face contorted in fear. He blurted out a desperate: "I know!!!"

Dustin

I was walking down the street and noticed a poster taped to a light pole at 9th and Folsom: it caught my eye because it had a picture of my homeless friend Dustin on it. The poster was a notification of his death, and an invitation to an informal memorial on the corner where he used to sit by Kama Sushi. I had just missed it. When I walked over to the corner all that there was was a Pabst beer can with a single flower in it.

Dustin used to sit out in front of the Trader Joes a few blocks from my house, before he started sitting in front of Kama Sushi. I used to buy him milk on a regular basis. Sometimes he would already have milk when I walked past him on my way into Trader Joes, but if I asked if he wanted anything he would still say, "milk, please." One day a few months before his death I was walking around the streets in the evening and we crossed paths and walked together for a while. Dustin started talking about how his mind worked. He had developed a system of elaborate concepts to explain his experiences, which were totally outside of how most of us encounter reality. I asked him if I could record our conversation, just so I could re-listen to it and try to make better sense of what he was saying. I listened to it again after learning of his passing, and decided to write it down. Our original conversation was far more chaotic and jumbled than what I portray below, with Dustin stumbling in his speech and saying things that I could make no sense of whatsoever, and myself asking many more questions than I portray here in order to arrive at questions that actually got somewhere. The outcome is a conversation that is far too clean and doesn't feel quite real anymore, but I've given it my best shot.

"When you're me," Dustin said, "there's all these things that fucks around in your head... you know, so many layers... and I'm stuck here." I asked him, "Are you saying that you get stuck because your mind is full of things that fuck with it; or are you stuck trying to figure out these layers?" Dustin said, "I'm stuck in the layers." He said that these layers were like an "unknown acronym." After asking Dustin a few confused questions, I finally started making sense of what he might mean. I asked if he meant that the layers all fit together in some way like the letters in an acronym that stand for something, but don't make any sense if you don't know what each letter stands for. He said, "Exactly." I said, "So each layer of your mind means something but you don't know what." "Exactly." "And all those layers fit together somehow, but you don't know how." He said "Exactly" again. He then said that "being stuck in these layers" made it impossible for him to believe his own experience of reality: "I don't believe in what the hells going on, right? It leaves room for... disparity, for doubt."

He began talking about "dectite." I asked, "What's 'dectite?'" and he replied, "It's this chemical my brain made. And I just can't get it to HIT." I asked Dustin if dectite was a natural chemical that all of our brains have. "No, no, the first time I saw it... it was probably like twenty years ago... And I saw it in Austin, Texas, right? It was like, I shot up, and it was good, and I saw that... that I needed to do something with it." I asked, "Do you mean that, when you shot up, you were able to see this special chemical that your brain made, and you then decided that you needed to do something with that chemical?" He told me that that was what he meant, but that he had not been able to figure out how to access the "dectite." If he could access the "dectite," he could solve the "acronym" of his mind. Dustin had also theorized that his mind was like a Rubik's cube that could not be solved... but that the "dectite" was the key to matching up the colors of the cube.

I said, "I'm trying to understand your experience... So... this chemical process in your brain... you said you SAW it... like, you actually WITNESS this chemical in your brain?" Dustin said: "It looked like a stimulus artifact." I asked a few confused questions before getting somewhere, and then asked: "An artifact? An internal artifact in your system that you can somehow witness?" Dustin said, "Yeah." He began to describe "chemical tools" that could potentially be used to "excavate" different types of "internal artifacts" if those chemicals could discover the "right pathways."

I asked Dustin if he felt that he experienced reality in a totally different way from most people, and he said, "Oh definitely. Like I got cut off somehow." I asked, "Cut off from the ordinary experience of human beings?" He replied that it wasn't fair. He said that he had been working hard his whole life and that all he got in return were "horrible lessons." I asked him what he meant by "working hard" ... if he meant trying to survive, trying to make money, trying to gain some kind of understanding...? His reply was, "I think I have to shoot up in the neuro-transponder receiver is the problem... I need to activate the receiver. This is what I can't figure, and no one will tell me. I need to see the chemical archive on it."

I understood this to mean that what Dustin had meant by "working hard" was that he was constantly trying to figure out how to shoot up in the "neuro-transponder receiver." Piecing the whole thing together was messy, but I got the impression that he hoped that shooting up in this "receiver" would help him access the "dectite," which was some kind of powerful "internal artifact" that could help him solve the "acronym" or the "Rubik's cube" of his mind. But it seemed that the fact that he kept striving to "activate" this certain "receiver," but kept failing, led to many "horrible lessons."

I asked Dustin, "When you say that no one will tell you how to activate the neuro-transponder receiver, do you mean that you're trying to figure something out and need support? Do you wish that you had other people to help you process these experiences that you have?" "Technically, yes," he said. I said, "So you feel alone in your experience." "Absolutely." "And you want support in your experience." "Totally." I asked: "Have you tried to find that?"

I felt like we were at a pretty important point in our conversation right then, but just at that moment we passed a liquor store and Dustin said, "Oh! I have to get a beer! It was nice to see you!" He ruffled through his pockets and said, "Shoot, I think I gave that guy all my change." "How much is a beer?" I asked. "A dollar." "Just a dollar? Let me give you a dollar." Dustin said, "Oh... thanks. I'm sorry." "No, no don't worry about it. The beer might be more than a dollar." I gave Dustin five bucks and his eyes lit up. "Oh! Thank you! See you later!"

"Take care brother."

When Dustin died a few months later, I asked around on the street about what happened. Dustin died from an overdose.

Modesto's Death

I was walking home after seeing some friends late one night, and as I passed Modesto's corner at 11th and Folsom he yelled: "Hey! Hey, buy me some alcohol, motherfucker!" I cracked up. Modesto had been asking me to buy him alcohol for half a decade at this point, and I never had. He shouted again: "Why are you laughing, motherfucker!" He started laughing too. I was about to move to the East Bay after being at 10th and Folsom in San Francisco for seven years. Modesto annoyed me sometimes; there were times when I tried to avoid him; days when I wished I could walk by without having him yell out "Hey! Hey!" and of course sometimes, "Hey, motherfucker!" But I had a big soft spot for him, and I was going to miss him. I thought to myself, "Fuck it. Let's do this."

I walked a block to my house, got two glasses and a bottle of whiskey, put them in a paper bag, and walked back to Modesto. We sat down on the street together and I poured us a drink and lit us some cigarettes. I gave him the rest of the bottle and he proudly showed me a secret stash spot where he kept things in the wall. It was late and the streets were quiet. I told him that I was going to move in a few weeks and that I would miss him.

Modesto looked at me with these incredibly sincere, wide eyes and asked me to visit him on his birthday in October. I told him I would. It was July of 2018 when I left San Francisco. When Modesto's birthday rolled around a few months later, I was behind on my rent and feeling nervous. I decided to Uber instead of going to see him. I felt sad because I knew it would have been really special for him to have me show up and say happy birthday, but I kept driving. I really needed that cash.

I found myself in the area a few times shortly afterwards, but I didn't see any sign of Modesto. I started to sense that he wasn't with us anymore. The last time I saw him before I left, he was lying on the street late at night coughing up blood. I had laid an extra blanket down by his head so that if he woke up he could rest his head on a something that wasn't saturated with his own blood and mucus.

One day I was in the area and decided to visit the old coffee shop where I used to go most mornings just to say hello to folks. Another homeless man I talked to often named Miles was outside and his eyes lit up when he saw me: "Hey, I was just asking Michelle the other day where you had been!" Michelle was his homeless comrade; my fondest memory of her was walking up to DNA Lounge one evening and someone at the club had made her a birthday cake and she was beaming with joy that her birthday had been remembered. I remembered immediately taking twenty bucks out of the ATM as soon as she said it was her birthday and giving it to her with

a big hug; a beautiful woman outside had flashed a smile at me when she saw that and then someone else had also given Michelle money and then I started worrying that someone on the street would rob her if they knew she had money that night.

I wanted to ask Miles about Modesto but I was conscious of not asking, “Hey, how’s Modesto doing?” because I had a strong sense that Modesto was gone. I just said, “Hey, the last time I saw Modesto he wasn’t doing so well.” Miles paused and looked at me: “Modesto got killed.” I was ready to hear that he had died, but hearing that word “killed” made time pause for me. The air felt heavy. I imagined the worst-case scenarios... Christ, please let Modesto not have been beaten to death on the street over a fucking bottle of tequila or some shit, I thought. As my heart went to these heavy places, Miles said, “It was a hit and run. Drunk guy leaving a club did 70 through a stoplight. Someone chased him onto the freeway while calling the cops and they blocked off the roads and caught him.” He paused. “His body flew. It just flew.” I thought about this frail old man’s body lifting into the air; I hoped his life had flown from him immediately; I hoped he was dead before he hit the ground; I hoped he never saw the car coming; I hoped the last second of his life was not one of fear and terror.

At that point Michelle rolled up on the cruiser bike that she rides around on and gave me big smile and a hug. “I was just telling him about Modesto,” Miles said. Michelle’s smile faded and she looked very sad. “I knew him for 27 years,” she said. “Before he was on the streets. He got married again, but he worked three jobs, all day every day. His wife started sleeping with someone else because he was working all the time. That was what broke him. He felt like there was nothing he could do right.” I had been talking with Miles and Michelle and Modesto for half a decade but had never heard that; Modesto had only told me about his first divorce back in Florida. Modesto was a joker and a trickster; a jovial and ridiculous human being who probably also lived many decades with a broken heart, not because of a woman, but because of the world.

Miles’ eyes filled with tears. They slowly dripped down his face and he wiped them away. I said, “I had told him I’d come see him on his birthday back in October... maybe if I had Modesto’s life would have changed just enough so that he wouldn’t have been walking across the street at that exact moment.”

Miles said, “No... Modesto was killed in September.”

Epilogue

The people in these stories are not representative of the larger homeless population. Take, for example, what’s happened recently in Oakland. As of late 2019, the San Francisco Chronicle estimates that Oakland’s homeless population, per capita, is now 27 percent higher than San Francisco’s. 68 percent of Oakland’s homeless

people are Black. They are victims of gentrification: 25 percent of Oakland's Black residents have been displaced in the past decade by rising costs of living, and those who can't afford relocating have ended up on the streets in large numbers. These aren't people with mental illnesses or drug addictions, they are low-income people who encountered an economic crisis, such as a job loss accompanied by a rent increase or medical emergency. Across the country, one-third of Americans live near or below the poverty line, but many of us have friends or relatives we can lean on in hard times. But what about those who don't? What about those from poor and marginalized communities, whose friends and families are also scraping by, without much relief to give? For them, homelessness is just one crisis away.

Such precarious conditions often lie at the intersections of inequity. Because Black Americans experience high degrees of segregation, housing and job discrimination, unequal education, and the trauma of incarceration, they are also hard hit by homelessness. The same is true for other groups who experience marginalization. For example, 40 percent of the nation's 1.6 million homeless youth are gay. LGBT youth who have been abused and disowned or fled their families due to homophobia end up on the street in vast numbers, and with few connections to help them get off. Trans youth are the most at risk when it comes to facing violence, isolation, and homelessness. In San Francisco, a full half of homeless youth are gay, and nearly a quarter of the adult homeless population is. Any group that faces prejudice and marginalization will have fewer resources to turn to in a difficult time, and will be more at risk for ending up on the street.

Any low-income person who also faces isolation and/or trauma is at risk. That includes veterans and formerly incarcerated people struggling to reintegrate into society. It includes women fleeing abusive relationships, and who have few other connections. It includes isolated elders. While people with mental illnesses and drug addictions are the most visible homeless people, an estimated 42 percent of San Francisco's roughly 10,000 homeless people struggle with drug or alcohol abuse... meaning that nearly sixty percent do not. An estimated 39 percent suffer from mental illness. However, those numbers strongly overlap: many homeless people in those percentages suffer from BOTH, and account for the estimated 38 percent of homeless people who are chronically homeless. In other words, it is likely that most homeless San Franciscans have neither a drug addition or a mental illness. They are homeless because of an economic crisis, combined with isolation, discrimination, or some kind of trauma.

If you care about homelessness, I can only offer advice coming from a place of being someone who cares as well. I can only tell you that it made ME feel a lot better looking at my homeless neighbors and smiling at them, rather than ignoring them. It made ME feel a lot better keeping a stash of donated blankets to hand out. Making small talk with them made ME feel better. It enriched MY life. Perhaps it would enrich yours as well.

Of course, individual acts of kindness won't change the conditions that create homelessness. In a world of sound bites and propaganda, it's essential to seek out good information. Vote for people from the local to the federal level who understand that the greatest source of homelessness is the slashing of the social safety net that began in the 1980s, and who are committed to rebuilding and strengthening it. Vote for people with the deepest commitments to affordable housing and universal healthcare, including mental health. Vote for people who understand that discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation contributes to homelessness, and who fight for the rights of all marginalized people. Vote for people who value international diplomacy and who won't send soldiers to get traumatized in needless wars. Vote for people who will fight to end mass incarceration. Vote for people who take a realistic and compassionate view towards drug addiction, who seek solutions in prevention and rehabilitation, not punishment.

Finally, organize. If you join an organization working on any of these issues, you will also be helping to keep people off the streets. None of us can do everything, but we can all do something. Choose what matters most to you, and get involved. When enough of us simply add our drop to the bucket, we can change the world.