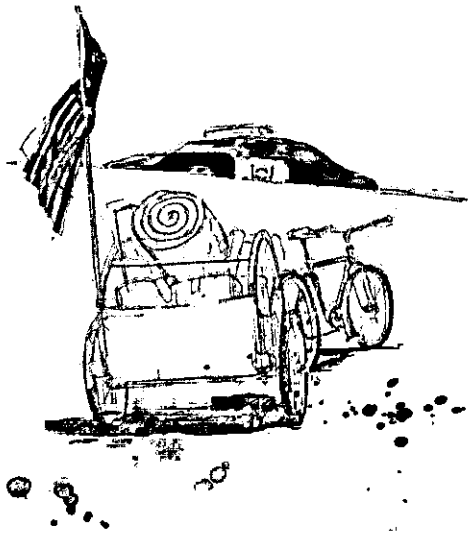
# HOMELESS IN SACRAMENTO

## Welcome to the new tent cities

*By William T. Vollmann*

My parking lot was an accidental complication of the building I bought. Thanks to poor eyesight, and a tincture of ecological concern, I decline to drive. Suffering from delusions of urban gardening, I collected bids on walling off my property. The answers were thousands of dollars too high, so I left the lot open. I worked out a few half-assed deals with certain commuters, marched over to the nearby body shop every six months or so to collect my rent (all the parking space they wanted for a flat rate), paid my property taxes, and entertained myself with isolation.

It was convenient for the neighbors to drive through, for the lumber-company trucks to turn around in, for police cars to idle in during slow moments. Sometimes a cop might be relaxing in his cruiser a foot from my door. When I approached him, he'd roll down his window very slowly. I'd ask whether he or I ought to accomplish any particular thing in relation to each other, and he'd reply: "You're good." Then he'd roll up the window and continue relaxing there. From time to time the body shop's big rigs would block my door so that I could barely get in or out. Drivers in a hurry pulled into my parking lot and pissed in my rose bushes. I began to understand that this giant rectangle of worn asphalt was an entity over which I had



no power and which in fact controlled *me* with responsibilities and liabilities.

Often in summer some stranger would make me the present of a truckload of dead tires, or a heap of rotten mattresses, or a boatlike structure that cost me five hundred dollars to haul away, or the fixtures from a gutted industrial kitchen (their disappearance cost me nine hundred). I called the city for advice. A nice woman who put me on hold came back to say that if the problem recurred the city would write me a ticket. I tried not to worry about what I couldn't help.

Now and again people would sleep there. They never asked—how would they have found me?—and I never turned them away. Several were filthy and obscene, some crazy, some hardened, and most quite polite—rather like people everywhere. An unknown few used my walls for toilets, jumped up in my face when I opened my front door, or took pliers to my water tap and left it running; so I fenced the building off with razor wire, and went on with my life.

There were times it was annoying to smell urine when I came outside on a hot morning. Indeed the most powerful quotidian argument against tolerating the proximity of the unsheltered must be an olfactory one. I quote a neighbor: "There's a distinct smell that you're talking about in the winter; there's this musty, moist smell of earth that's not necessarily an offensive smell like a fart; it's a sort of a musty smell that pervades the room when a homeless person who's been camping in the rain and using the same sleeping bag for a month walks in." Other times the smell is simply excrement. In my parking lot, one such human calling card will continue to make itself known throughout an entire rainless Sacramento summer.

*William T. Vollmann's most recent book is* Imperial. *His last article for* Harper's Magazine, *"A Good Death," appeared in the November 2010 issue.*

Photographs of the Safe Ground camp in Sacramento by Max Whittaker/Prime.
Illustrations by Stan Fellows

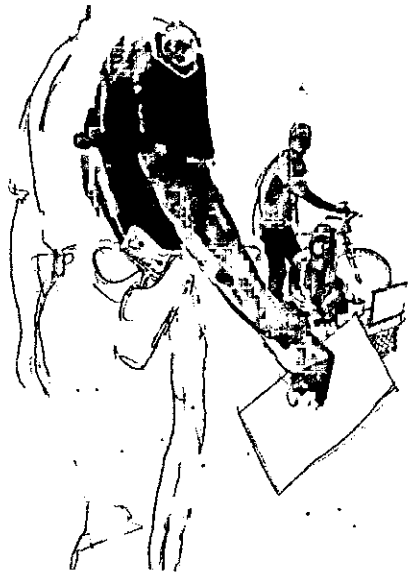
Sheer necessity excuses some of these productions, and since the exterior of my building cultivates an abandoned look, I cannot blame those defecators who believe what they see. But my property offers considerable square footage in which to relieve one's bowels; and with greater frequency than the law of averages would predict, the spot of choice, which incidentally offers no advantage of shelter or modesty, lies immediately in front of my door. When I have had a bad day, I chalk this up to simple meanness. Year after year, I take up my hose and my humility, such as it is, and ask myself why. A convenient answer is that there is no why, that my guest intended nothing in particular and thought of *me* no more than he will when he dies and his corpse stinks.

How one characterizes this unpleasant topic is the best indicator of one's "homelessness politics." Some citizens dwell on it with a disgust sufficiently obsessive to border on relish. They see their homeless brothers and sisters as, in essence, walking (or shambling) filth factories. From such a presupposition, logic demands the isolation, or better yet the elimination, of the contagion. How far they would wish authority to go to make the homeless disappear I've never asked them, fearing that the answer would make me sad. As for the more militant advocates of homeless rights, they belittle the stinking actuality, and sometimes accuse those who point it out of belonging to the other camp.

From this ideological division follow all others. If I set up and maintained a portable toilet in my parking lot (never mind that this experiment would be illegal), would the immediate neighborhood get cleaner or dirtier? In other words, if a local human need gets satisfied, is the result to attract people in need from other localities? People can disagree in good faith on this question, as on the kindred matter of illegal immigration, and even on the next: When I give a panhandler a beer on Christmas because that is what he wants, do you approve or disapprove? Now for another question: Who should take care of people in need? Should it be "the government," or charitable organizations, or "the neighborhood"? And if these entities decline to accept the obligations you have defined for them, what then? And while you and I are disagreeing in good faith, what's happening to the woman the police carried off from my parking lot in a squad car who now has returned to spend the night in a wet blanket on the asphalt between my fence and my billboard because she can't find a better place? And whether she moves her bowels considerately in a bag of kitty litter, as do some of my homeless acquaintances, or makes a mess on my doorstep, how relevant should that be to whichever "homeless policy" gets applied to her?

Some of my guests stayed a little longer, and to them I got more attached. It seemed to me that since I had no particular use for my parking lot, permitting other human beings to dwell there was the least I could do. I am not a great believer in organized religion, but the Golden Rule has always appealed to me.

To the ones who stayed the longest I gave small jobs. Sometimes I hired them to clean up the messes they'd made. "What's wrong with this picture?" said one old neighbor, shaking his head at my simplemindedness. But at least that way I didn't have to do it. Some of them weeded along the base



of my new fence, or swept the lot. A few surprised me by being ferociously hard workers. And I noticed that the longer they stayed and the more we chatted, the cleaner and safer my parking lot became. My next-door neighbor also got to tolerate some of them and sometimes paid them to landscape the green strip that lay between us. They said they liked him. He told me that his building no longer got graffitied. He did get burglarized once, but he was pretty sure that was a professional job. He said it was fine with him if they stayed all winter. In the spring they could be on their way. I nodded and smiled, thinking that they were on my lot, not his, and as far as I was concerned they could stay forever.

I fatuously imagined that everyone won. The homeless got a place to stay and to store their personal possessions; my parking lot was less of a headache to me; and when I went out to the blacktop at night to share my beer with them, they told me stories, and we tolerated and entertained and conveniently or inconveniently misunderstood one another as human beings will do. As for those who disdained my new friends, they were now spared seeing them stretched out on a public sidewalk. Nor did the city have to pay to shelter them.

The police always kicked them off eventually. Every time I would stroll up to the squad car, there seemed to be unfamiliar officers in it, so it was difficult to arrive at any arrangement. Once an officer remarked that should I erect a toolshed on my lot, and should the door happen to be closed whenever his squad car came rolling through, he probably wouldn't look inside. I will admit to you that when two officers are doing their business with itinerants, even when all parties happen to be on my property, I sometimes have to nerve myself up, because authority dislikes being approached at such times, especially from the back. But it goes against my self-respect to avert my face when guests of mine fall into trouble. Although for my own safety he advised me very earnestly against it, one officer told me that if I wrote a letter saying that so-and-so could stay, then so-and-so could stay, which worked for at least a week. ("I just feel sorry for 'em, officer," I kept saying as stupidly as I could.) But then came the policeman who announced that it was illegal for me to let anyone whatsoever camp on my premises, and everyone had to go today, no interrup-

tions and no arguments. I answered that I understood. To my friends standing anxiously around me, I said that I was sorry and would not forget them. The officer softened a trifle then. He explained to me that it was not his job to hunt the homeless; he acted only when he got complaints.

Denise had lived on my parking lot for close to a year.[1] Once, her mother came all the way from Mississippi to stay there a while. Can you believe that? Can you imagine what her life must have been, that sleeping in a parking lot a thousand miles from home could be an improvement? The mother soon moved on; the daughter stayed. She unfailingly wished me good morning; we joked together; many times I felt happy to be her neighbor. One cold winter afternoon when I had cooked some Chinese food, I took half of it out to my parking lot to give to Denise. She was lying on her side in her sleeping bag, and her teeth were chattering. "You mean, you cooked this?" she said. "Thank you, honey."

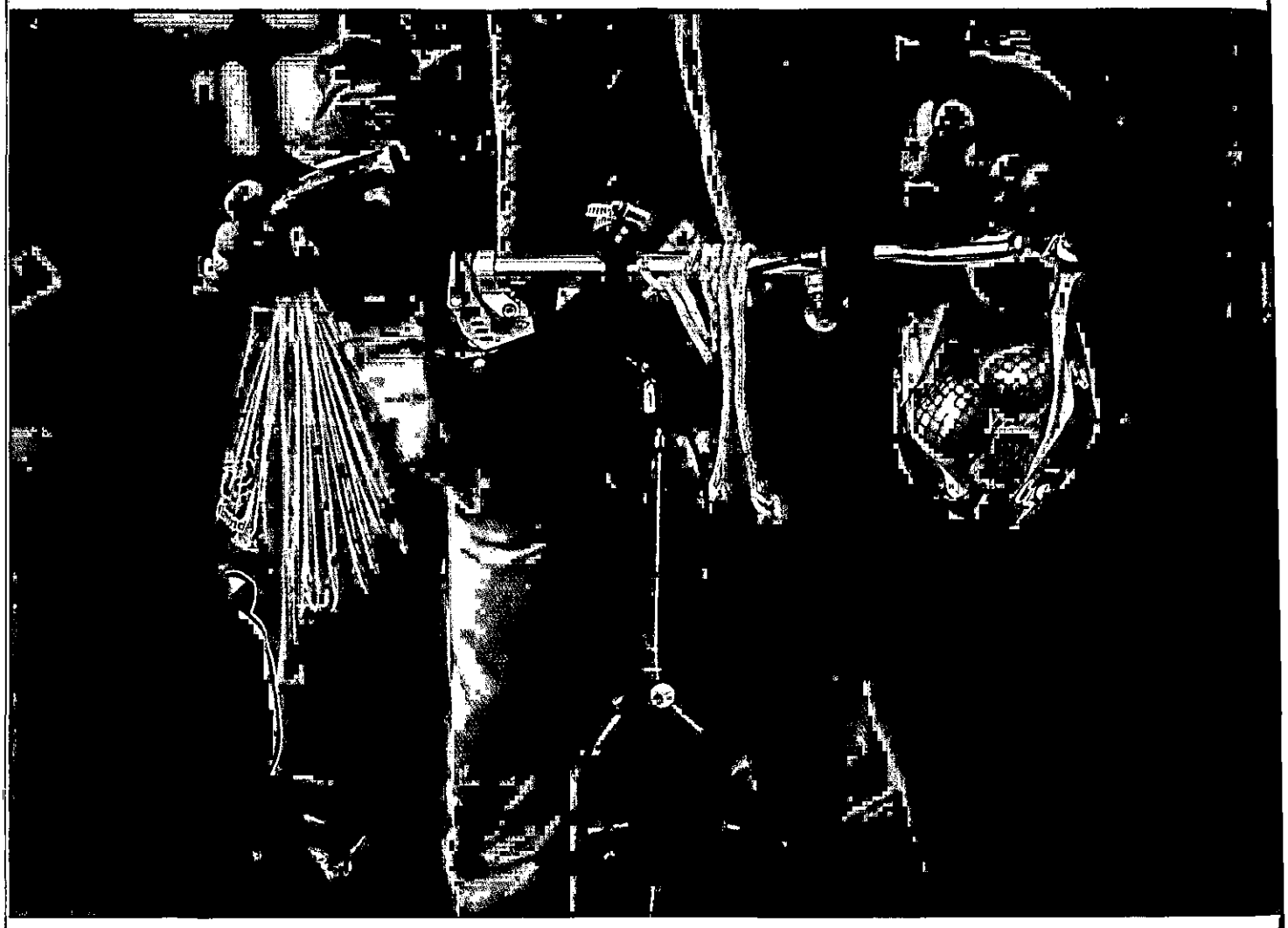
When they evicted Denise, she screamed in rage and grief. A day later, the neat tarp houses my friends had made in their corner of the lot had all been transformed into garbage. I paid somebody fifty dollars to haul it away.

Would you like to know what Denise's house used to look like? I quote from her police citation: TENT CONSTRUCTED ON PALLETS, MATTRESS, SLEEPING BAG, BLANKETS, MILK CRATE, CHAIR. Under VIOLATIONS the officer WROTE: UNLAWFUL CAMPING, REFUSED SHELTER, IGNORED PRIOR WARNINGS. He also checked: BOOKING REQUIRED.

I wondered why the officials of my city were so stupid and cruel, not to mention wasteful. How much public money did they spend moving these people from bad to worse? How many schools, parks, clinics, and buses got starved in proportion; how many violent crimes went unsolved? I also wondered what "private property" meant—the right to go on paying property taxes, I suppose. Then I went inside my building and sat down because I felt like crying.

The officer who agreed that I could write those permission-to-stay letters had begun by explaining that I should kick everyone out because if somebody got injured I might get sued. I replied, as usual, I was willing to take

[1] *In writing about the homeless people I have come to know, I find myself baffled by the problem of how to describe them most helpfully, or least harmfully. But (to get back to the matter of avoiding harmfulness) one thing I have done is to alter homeless people's names. Some are burdened with legal difficulties, and my portrayals of individuals might inadvertently insult or humiliate someone whose circumstances have stretched him into what you or I might call oversensitivity.*



that risk because I felt sorry for them. The officer then remarked that I was at no imminent risk of a criminal lawsuit, but that the city attorney might file civil charges against me. He requested my name and telephone number. I provided those with my best appearance of smiling amusement, determined not to betray my true feeling, which was dread. After he departed, I began to get angry. Much of life, at least in America, consists of submission to bullies in and out of uniform.

I telephoned the nearest homeless shelter, Loaves and Fishes. It lay in walking distance of my parking lot. Once or twice I had visited in order to take train-hopping lessons from hoboes. Its guiding spirit was a certain Sister Libby Fernandez. A police officer remarked that she was a troublemaker whom he knew very, very well, and advised me to steer clear of her.

So that was how I met petite, wiry Sister Libby, who had shown up with two other people to inspect my parking lot. A slightly rotund man shook my hand, and that was how I met Greg Bunker, an advocate for the homeless who ran Francis House, on C Street, until he died of a heart attack this past December.

With them stood Mark Merin, a handsome, clear-eyed fellow born in 1943, a trifle incongruous in his suit. Mark is a civil rights lawyer.[2] A local magazine describes his desk, "which isn't so much a desk as a gigantic slab of redwood, sanded and polished so smooth it's nearly a mirror. It is held aloft by twisted, gnarled branches that provide nooks for small masks and art sculptures." Mark, in short, is an aesthete like me. He plans out stained-glass mosaics in his basement workshop.

Once I asked Mark to relate any experiences he had had, early on, with poverty, and he said: "I have several different kinds of memories. My dad worked in a survey party and there was a guy named Earl Smith, a black guy, and my dad told me that when they went to restaurants he would drink the sherry that was in a little flask on the table, because in those days you would get snapper soup with a little sherry, and my dad told me that some people just have to make use of everything they can find. And we talked about poverty. We lived in Philly. I was about nine or ten. We never had much. Our family

[2] *He has won class-action suits against jails that conduct unconstitutional strip searches of their inmates, and suits against right-to-lifers who intimidate patients at abortion clinics. He is arguing a federal case against the Border Patrol for imperiling illegal immigrants, and his writ action delayed the newly imposed electricians' certification exam until it could be translated into Spanish. His "San Quentin Six" case, he notes, "is still cited on the Eighth Amendment limits to conditions of confinement."*

was pretty close to the ground itself. It was kind of fun. We would go out and pick wild grapes and blackberries and can them just to keep things together." The home that he shares with his wife, the lawyer-poet Cathleen Williams, is a former rooming house on the edge of the neighborhood he so often serves: Alkali Flat, where Sister Libby and Greg Bunker operated their respective ministries, and where I live as discreetly as I can within my anonymous building.

The homeless woman down the block told me that Denise and the others remained in police custody. This appeared plausible. Denise for her part was a very enthusiastic prostitute whose side businesses occasionally exceeded the category of victimless crime. (From a complaint submitted to the police by a local business owner: "There is a parking area adjacent to the alley by 1221 C Street where I have seen the campers sitting around drinking. I have also seen them having sex at that location without regard to who was present. This activity offends my senses.") Denise's companions practiced equally interesting professions. To reduce my risk of burglary, I never invited inside my place any of the people who slept outside it, not even Denise, who had faithfully offered me her by no means insignificant charms. By their own accounts, most of her friends had been in prison. What they might have done to get there was not my business, and what I did within my building was hardly theirs. So I would bring out cold drinks and we'd stay outside, inhaling the fragrance of stale urine on asphalt.

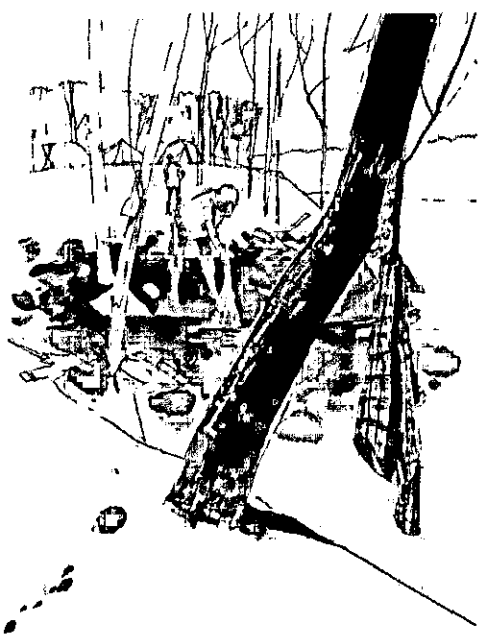
At any rate, the four of us stood around in my parking lot on that hot afternoon, trying to decide what to do. I don't feel that Mark and his comrades manipulated me into doing something for which I felt unready. Rather, they inspired me into an escalation of sorts. We decided to erect two semipermanent shelters. Mark put up a sign that read SAFE GROUND.

Safe Ground is a movement to protect the homeless in their itinerancy. It was formed in 2008 in response to Sacramento City Ordinance 12.52, which makes it illegal to sleep even in one's own backyard for more than one night at a time. The law specifies: "It is not intended by this section to prohibit overnight camping on private residential property by friends or family of the property owner, so long as the owner consents and the overnight camping is limited to not more than one consecutive night."

In January 2009, Mark filed suit against the city, arguing, as he explained it to me, that it was "a violation of the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment to prevent someone from sleeping. And taking someone's property was a violation of the Fourth Amendment—unreasonable search and seizure.

"The homeless started saying, Gee, if we're not going to be arrested, why should we be hiding behind trees and so forth? So they started making an encampment, and right off the bat, there were three or four hundred people behind the Blue Diamond almond factory." That was the first Safe Ground.

Safe Ground moves with the homeless as they are obliged to relocate. The orders "come through the police.



It's always the police who deal with homeless people." Safe Ground eventually made its way to Mark's porch. "People gathered on the sidewalk and said, What now? So at that time I volunteered my property. That was in August. We had had other people, homeless people, living on our porch before that, people we got to know who seemed to need a little bit of help. So we were used to making our space available."

Denise and the others got removed from my parking lot on a Wednesday in March. On the following Monday I received a notice from the City of Sacramento. I was informed that my property was a public nuisance. I had committed two violations. One was of Code C18, SCC 8.04 100 E: "Dangerous/unsightly." I was ordered to "cease maintaining any dangerous, unsightly or blighted condition which is detrimental to the health, safety, or welfare of the public. Comments: PLEASE MAINTAIN THIS PROPERTY IN A CONDITION WHICH DOES NOT CREATE A BLIGHT IN THE COMMUNITY."

The other violation was of Code C46, SCC 17.68: "Landscaping/Paving." Although my home state suffered from drought and water wastage, I was commanded to landscape and irrigate the unpaved portions of my property. "Only living vegetation may be used as a primary ground cover."

I had owned this building for four years, during which time no authority had ever expressed concern on either of these matters.

The letter was dated the previous Wednesday. I was required to correct my code violations within seven days, or the city would assess fines.

I telephoned my designated official, Officer Ricardo Vargas, and, needless to say, got an answering machine. Then I poured myself a drink and called Mark, who, bless him, came over straightaway.

Had Mark not helped me, I would not have dared to resist the city further. I would have paid whatever fines were demanded, and spent several thousand dollars landscaping and irrigating, and paid someone to keep the place clean, and kept my head low. If somebody wanted to camp on my parking lot, I would still have told him to go ahead. And I would have done this until the fines grew too high for me to pay, and then I think I would have sold my property or abandoned it.

My late father once advised me to pick my battles. This one had picked me. ("Well, that's what you should have expected when you bought the place," said my mother.)

The outcome was softer and in a way sadder than I had expected. Mark dealt with Officer Vargas, and I crawled thankfully out of the city's jaws scot-free. I cleaned up the mess the police had made and waited for more people to set up house, but nobody came. I met a young couple on my sidewalk, and they told me they were scared of being arrested. For months I stored an old tarp, together with Denise's stinking mattress and several piss-stained letters and photographs of hers that showed up in my excrementitious ivy patch, and when vermin made an appearance I got rid of the mattress. A friend took the tarp to his garage, and I believe it lies there still. I saved Denise's cleanest photograph. If she ever comes back, I'll give it to her.

I asked Mark, "What's your opinion of the communist slogan *From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs?*"

"I like it. If we did that, if society worked that way, then everybody would feel like a contributing member. What pains me is to see people who have talents, abilities, who are just unable to care for their families because of the way things are structured. I think that under the Constitution it's recognized that there are liberties that can't be abridged by a government. The right to life assumes a lot of things, one of which is that *you can be someplace*. It is a fundamental right to be left alone, as long as you are not bothering anybody else. It is a right to live off the grid."

"How well would Thoreau do here in Sacramento if he tried to live and write *Walden*?"

"If he had his own property he could examine his barn and his pond, but otherwise we wouldn't allow that."

## II

*On applying to the assessors, I am surprised to learn that they cannot at once name a dozen in the town who own their farms free and clear.*

—Henry David Thoreau, 1854

In the summer of 2010, Mark told me: "We have two encampments now on the river that move their stuff every day, sixty or eighty people, and another that is trying to stay where they are. They are trying to keep pretty concealed."

I decided to sleep at one of these encampments.

Greg Bunker furnished me the phone number of a pastor named David Moss, whose name I recognized from the list of plaintiffs in Mark's lawsuit. He had been arrested on Mark's lot, and his possessions (a tent and sleeping bag, I suppose) confiscated as usual. I inquired about staying

drifted around. Often the people stood in small groups, laughing and catching up with one another. I saw a weather-beaten blonde in a checked shirt shooting the breeze with another woman and two men, one of whom wore a long hunting knife at his belt. Groups of men stood around spitting. Slowly, the cheer faded with the evening light. We were getting hungry. Some people formed a circle with their arms around one another's waists; they must have been praying. Finally the vans and cars began to arrive, an hour after Ernest had expected them. From nowhere appeared a Latino in early middle age, probably a pastor, who began to intone a prayer no one could hear. He started over, but nobody listened. Now the backs of the vehicles opened. As Ernest had promised, it was "a real smorgasbord."

You never knew what each line would offer. My first expedition yielded me a plastic bowl with about four tablespoons of spaghetti, a fat, delicious cheese roll, and a sweet pastry. The next line was for burritos, but they almost immediately ran out. There was a line people thought was for soup and ice cream, and I could see somebody happily licking her ice-cream cone, but by the time I reached the tailgate of the car there was only soup, very hot and delicious, the fresh potatoes and turnips still a trifle crunchy. Serving it was a pretty Latina televangelist named Natalie. She told me the police had several times threatened her with arrest for distributing this food. Once, she had asked them what she was supposed to do with it then, and they said: "Dump it out." She replied: "I've spent four or five hours making this soup, and I'm not going to dump it out." I did not get to find out what happened next, because the man in line behind me very reasonably told me: "You got yours; now get the hell out of the way." It had grown almost chilly, but the asphalt was still warm and good against my buttocks as I ate my soup beside a long-bearded man who stroked his piebald hound; another man approached, greeted the owner, then caressed the animal.

Concerned that my sleeping bag might have blown away (wishing to travel light, I had brought an old painter's tarp for a ground cloth and eschewed any tent), I decided to return to camp. Lonnie and Ernest came with me. Walking rapidly through the sweet darkness with these friends, it seemed to me that the way back was very short. Lonnie talked a bit about his ex-girlfriend, and Ernest alluded to his researches into the Bible and the Egyptian sun god, Ra. He told me that *Amen* comes from Amenhothep. He said that the scariest thing that had ever happened to him at Safe Ground was simply embarking on his first night outdoors, because he came from Chicago, where "that's unheard-of. It was a *shock*." Now he liked it; it had taught him humility, he said. I did not ask him what he meant.

It was very dark now, almost nine o'clock. Ernest called ahead on his cell phone. An elder had placed logs over our sleeping bags to keep them from blowing away. We thanked him. People were going to bed.

"I'm gonna put on some jammies and lay it all down," a woman said from the doorway of her tent.

"Awright, sister. You know where I am if you need me."

"Thank you so much."

"Good night."

"G'night."

"Good night, everyone."

"Hey, will you shut up back there?"

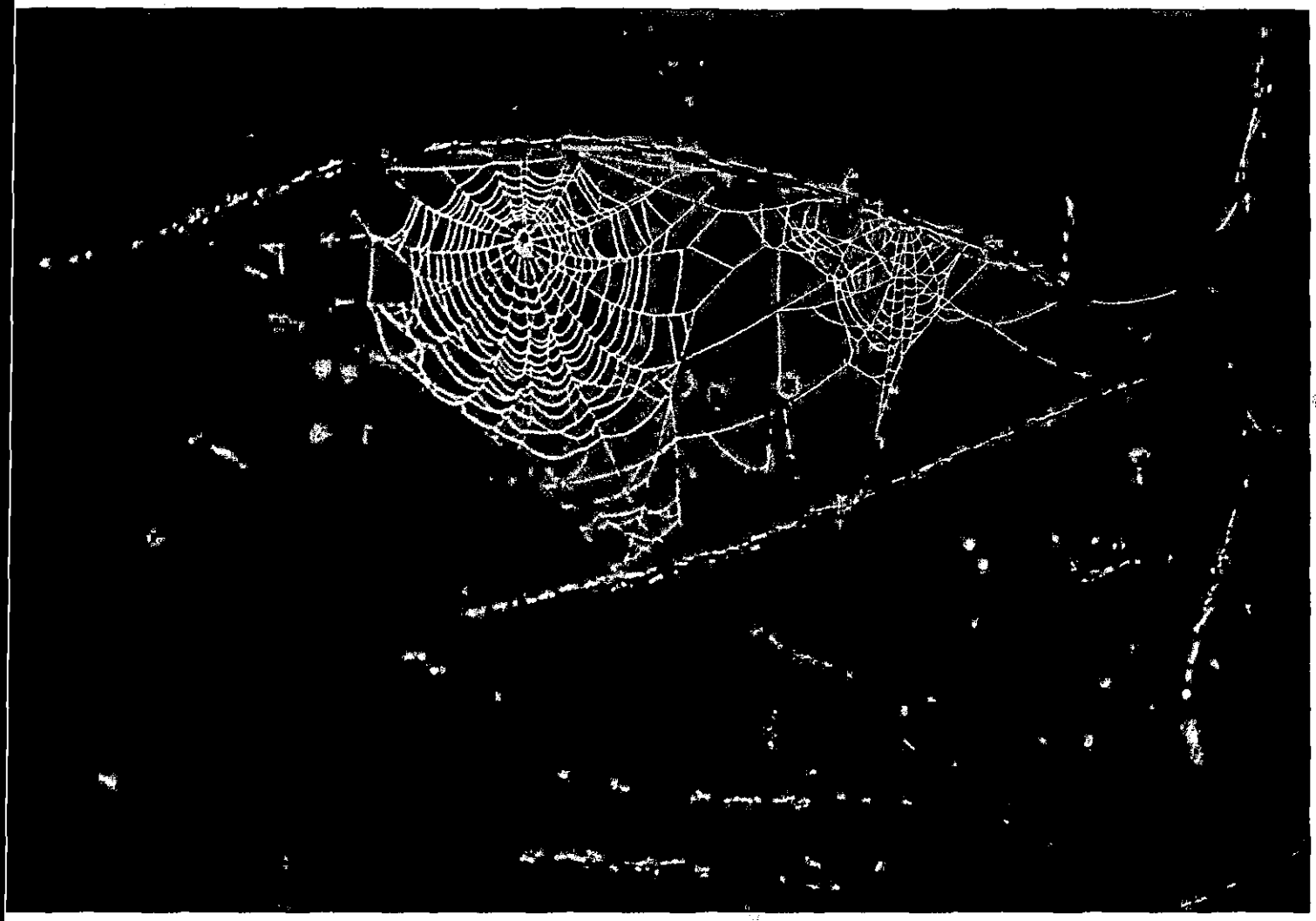
I lay on my back staring up at the silhouetted treetops, which seemed to grow toward one another, closing in the pond of pallid sky, everything dark where I was, and then there were pools of light from downpointed flashlights, and faraway dots of light a little above the ground. A white shirt and black arms came skimming a flashlight to and fro along the path. The frogs and crickets got louder and louder. Next I began to hear the river. Slowly, the dome tents bleached into visibility in the darkness around me. The camp was almost silent now. There was a smell of foot sweat, which went away. I heard a man and a woman murmuring sweetly. There came a cold loud wind, and then a freight train blared through, no more than five hundred feet away, a long metal exhalation (the frogs and crickets continuing steadily through it). I had almost dropped off to sleep again when a crowd of people passed on the trail, talking loudly, smoking cigarettes, heading for what the Safe Ground elders called their "rogue camps." Now and again came new trains and passersby. Sometimes one or two of the Safe Ground tents began to glow from flashlights within. Although Ernest had to get up early, he wanted to read more about Ra, and he also had a thriller somebody had given him. His tent glowed for a long time. A woman coughed. The moon rose through the clouds. I smelled dead leaves near my face, and woodsmoke from some rogue campfire. The woman coughed over and over, patiently.

Wes, who occupied the nearest tent and knew a thing or two about improvised prison weapons (for instance: alternately melt and cool empty ketchup packets, adding and amalgamating as you go, until you have a plastic shiv that can kill if it goes into someone's eye), had remarked that there were skunks hereabouts, one of which had entered his sleeping bag; and then I felt some soft small creature against the back of my knee. It could have been a skunk, an opossum, a feral cat. Since it was outside my sleeping bag, I let it stay where it pleased and went back to sleep as coolness came down through the trees.

Dawn came near. A couple murmured an argument. The side of a woman's tent rustled faintly, and I smelled urine. Then I heard a lid screwing onto a jar, and the smell went away. A cellphone alarm began to tweet. Beneath the paling sky, a silhouette rose and drank from its silhouetted water bottle.

It had all been much more organized, peaceful, mutually respectful, and even familial than I would have expected—as beautiful, in short, as the long-haired, brown-eyed, brown-skinned young homeless woman Maya, who was walking and chatting with another woman, Ellen, on the way to dinner. A week later I asked after Maya, and Ellen replied: "She disappeared."

On the following week I chose a Friday instead of a Tuesday, thinking that Safe Ground's ambiance might differ. This time I did not telephone ahead. At the warm and sunny place by the big tree where the chairs and shed were, nobody was waiting. "What, they done left?" said a slim black woman. "They must be at the church." I walked toward the river just in case and met Ernest, who said that most of the "core group" were staying at the Lutheran church on 27th and O, in care of Dave Moss. So I walked



up there. It was a mile or two. Moss had requested that all his visitors enter by the back alley, so as not to inflame the neighbors, who wished to avoid the proximity of unfortunates.

Since it was the first of the month, some people had received checks and did not need the facilities. Fewer than twenty people sat at the tables in that clean and pleasantly air-conditioned but otherwise rather dreary room, whose windows looked out only onto corridors. It seemed better than, say, a welfare office. Nobody who waited here had to jump through any more hoops. I signed the Safe Ground pledge form when I entered. Backpacks lay neatly along the walls. On a corner table were innocuous paperback novels, a Christian yellow pages, and some board games. At the long table where the church people would serve us dinner stood two pitchers of ice water, and as I watched a lady came out of the kitchen to add more ice cubes.

I sat down, slowly cooling down after the walk. Of all the people there I recognized only Frank, who did not seem to remember me; Dave Moss; and Ellen, who came in after I did and although I greeted her by name appeared to have no use for me. Ernest and Thirteen had stayed by the river to help guard the camp. (Frank remarked that a party was probably in progress there, because he was *here*.)

They were all calm, patient, and so clean that even the tall sunburned man behind me could have passed for a member of the propertied class. Some of them read the newspaper. At one table a slender, tired black woman sat leaning on her hand, while a white man and a black man, both wearing caps, chatted about skunks. At the next table the conversation was about false arrest. Ernest had said that the Tuesday food givers whom we had met the previous week had all gotten arrested this week. A man at my table said this was an exaggeration; no one had gotten arrested.

It seemed pretty tame to me; but Moss now made an announcement: "After dinner we can't go outside until 7 A.M. We've gotta be really under the radar about this. If you have to smoke this evening sometime between now and six, go out in ones and twos at the most. We cannot be visible to the neighbors or we'll have to shut the program down."

A blondish young woman named Charlene remarked that up in Oroville she had rented a lady's front yard for three hundred dollars a month so that she could pitch her tent there, with kitchen and toilet privileges. The police arrested her. The neighbors came to her defense, the landlady brought proof of payment, and the police had to let her go, but did so in angry spirit. She also said that in Marysville the city

council had posted signs in churches announcing that people were not allowed to stay there after dark.

Frank asked for a volunteer to lead us in prayer and thank the church. We formed a circle, holding hands, and a woman prayed in a weak, tremulous voice. I heard her express gratitude to Safe Ground. I held Charlene's hand, which she snatched away as soon as the prayer was over. Then the church people served us dinner from a buffet table, ladies first. I thanked one woman for the salad she ladled onto my plate, and she replied: "It's my pleasure to serve." People like her give Christians a good name.

David Leeper Moss, retired from the United Methodist ministry, big-shouldered alumnus of the board of Loaves and Fishes, white of beard and mustache, had been involved with Safe Ground since July of last year. "I heard about Tent City and defying the anti-camping ordinance, and I thought, Man, this is the place where I would like to be! There's a disconnect between the people who are supporting Safe Ground and the people who are living Safe Ground, and since I know my gifts and graces, I know that I can be a bridge between them."

I told him that the necessity of his guests' hiding themselves from the neighbors made me sad. He replied: "The Trinity Cathedral on Capitol doesn't have the same community that we do, so people can smoke on the sidewalk. Also, it's larger. There are even facilities for pets." (All but one of the animal owners here tonight had left their animals in their tents at the river. The exception was a woman with a tiny, utterly silent dog.)

Moss went on: "If you ask me, the churches are too damned timid."

"There must be many homeless who for whatever reason won't follow the Safe Ground rules," I said.

"Safe Ground is not a solution for homelessness. It's part of a mosaic of solutions."

I liked that. It was modest enough that it might be true. Beside me, a woman and two men pored over a puzzle, and at another table, two men stared into space.

At City Hall I once heard a homeless man remind the mayor and his council that the great luxury of sleeping inside a church is rendered less delicious by the concrete floor; and that night I received some education on that topic. Mark had an epigram: "the ground gets awfully hard when you're in your fifties and sixties." I was now fifty-one. Thanks to several sedentary years, I possessed some stomach padding; so it was merely the grinding of my hip bones against an unyielding surface that annoyed me. Preferring to sleep in the open for a number of reasons, not the least the ability to make a speedy departure in the event of a police raid, I never brought to Safe Ground any tent or pad until the arrival of the rainy season. I used to camp often in my youth, and lying in dirt did not annoy me. Of course, novice Safe Grounder that I was, I had failed to consider the possibility that tonight I might be sleeping somewhere else. In short, I lacked a foam pad. Noticing extra sleeping bags, I asked Frank whether I could borrow one to put under me.

"One sleeping bag per person," said Frank. "Do you have a sleeping bag?"

"Yes."

"If you already have a sleeping bag, then that's your sleeping bag."

"Sure, Frank," I said, knowing that this was how it had to be. The floor did feel hard, so I wandered into a vacant side chamber labeled CLASSROOM. I liked the look of it; it was carpeted.

"*Hello?*" came a sharp female voice. "These are *women's* rooms."

"Perfect," I said, wishing I had worn a dress.

My new friend Peyton, a blocky man with a crew cut, invited me to be a fourth in a game of Yahtzee, but I didn't feel like it. So I lay down on the floor and listened to the creakings of chairs. A man was explaining to his friend: "That's actually a dark star. Guy's helmet, that's a dark-star emblem."

"Is there any other ladies that want to go to bed?" called Frank.

"That sleeping bag is oh-six," he was saying a moment later. "Zero-eight is Peggy Sue."

"No, I just wanted to get my towel," a woman was saying.

People were folding up the tables and chairs. I got up and helped them where I could.

"Did you sign your agreement?" Frank was asking someone.

"It'll be a little snug," said a man, holding up a pair of pants.

"Lights out in thirty minutes!" shouted Frank.

Most of them were already on or in their sleeping bags, stretched out against the wall. It was from their quiet submission that I could tell they were homeless. They became long and narrow as they lay there, most of them on their stomachs and sides. I lay back down.

"I sleep here," Frank informed me, "so unless you want my feet in your face, you might want to move."

I moved.

"You guys," he was saying, "you move the garbage can *this* way. What's your name?"

"Doc."

"You're oh-four-nine."

Relenting, Frank now issued me a sleeping bag to pad the floor with. I thanked him; I was oh-three-five.

"Lights out in ten minutes," said Frank. "You'd better wrap up that game."

I heard two men call each other *brother*.

Lying on my back in the darkness, I stared up at the high ceiling and around me at the yellow-glowing door panes, the long low sleeping-bag islands against the walls, and Dave Moss sitting alone in the light of the restroom doorway, reading a book. He sat there all night as far as I know, for in the morning he was in the same spot. Another sentinel manned the table by the front door. I suppose that if one of us had attacked another, or tried to go into where the women slept, one of them would have called for Frank. As I lay there, I felt a strange feeling of happiness. I could hear a woman's high-pitched cough, rich with phlegm. Now the church was almost entirely silent. A man rustled crossly in his sleeping bag. A pack buckle clicked quietly open.

In the morning the lights came on at six o'clock sharp. Some of us were already rolling up our sleeping bags as quietly as we could. Frank was booming out: "I need a volunteer to mop the floor. I need a volunteer to clean the men's bathroom. Thank you, volunteers." There came a prayer, and toast and cereal for breakfast.

Fortunately, when we stood in line for our free food at a new location, be-

neath the 12th Street bridge, there were no officers in sight. Moreover, when on the path out of camp we had passed some park rangers, the woman beside me, my new friend Cecilia, said that it was best not to speak to them; they in turn looked right through us. Dave Moss had said: "The park rangers, don't ask, don't tell, don't see, don't know." That reminded me of a man I had once overheard on the bus, explaining that due to budget cuts his probation officer was leaving him to his own devices. "Works for me," the man said.

I began to wonder how many so-called social services, doubtless with the best intentions, inverted their functions and became instruments of persecution. I support the mandate of police to protect me from crime, of park rangers to keep my local green spaces from becoming ganglands or dumping grounds. Surely these uniformed persons were doing neither more nor less than following their mission when they uprooted the homeless. How could this be rectified?

In any event, nobody fined, arrested, or threatened Natalie that evening. I was near the end of the line, so all I got from her was two spoonfuls of soup, but it was wonderful. I thanked that sweet kind woman and she said God bless you. I sat down in the sand to eat. Then I walked back to Safe Ground to lie down in the dirt.

Cecilia, who had given me permission to be her next-door neighbor, had remarked that "at night, it's stone quiet." It did seem more that way when I put my earplugs in. All the same, on that occasion I found myself awoken several times with great abruptness by the ammoniac stenches of those of my neighbors who must have been relieving themselves in their tents. I was shocked by how powerful the smell was. There must have been riper urine already in whichever jars or bottles they used.

October was more than half spent, and still the rain had not come. I went down by the river to sleep, and met Ernest on the path. He had split from Safe Ground on account of "politics." He showed me where he camped, right across the path from his former comrades, in some thick brush. He introduced me all around, and I shook everybody's hand. Then I went back across the path to Safe Ground.

I asked a woman in the entranceway of her dome tent (the sun red on her face) how she had come to be there. She replied: "You know, where I was at, I was at Saint Francis in a cot, and they kicked seven of us out with no notice. They got an old man who doesn't bathe, calls you an effin' b[3] every day, and we got kicked out because we complained. So we went to Trinity Lutheran and slept on the steps. They were very nice to us, and I just hated the idea of going back into a shelter, so I went truckin' down to Loaves and Fishes, where my friend said, Why don't you try Safe Ground?, and I met Frank, and he said, Why don't you take a tent and a sleeping bag?"

A man told me that his best friend, now deceased, had recommended Safe Ground. "They set me up right here and gave me a brand-new sleeping bag." He had been here a week. "I can't stay too long, because of the weather. They say the water gets up here, right up to your calf."

Annie had been homeless for two years. She was my age—fifty-one. Her skin was beautifully wrinkled. She was so high-cheekboned and brown-complected that at first I thought her to be Native American. I told her she looked good, and she said: "Thank you for lying. I have my teeth at the dentist's office." "I was born here in Sac," she said. "I lived in Tahoe for thirty-one years. I came from a very rich family. My dad died from a heart attack, and two years later my mother committed suicide because she couldn't deal with it. That just kicked the hell out of me, because I once faked a little suicide attempt and [my family] said, We don't do that because we're German." When she divorced her husband, she told him that she didn't want anything they had had together. It used to be that she had to pack up every day. One reason she appreciated Safe Ground was that "I can't do that camping thing anymore," meaning the moving. She also said: "I never seen a place with so little fighting—nothing. I think Frank is the reason. He's an excellent man. He's fair. He neglects his family sometimes for us."

[3] *"Fucking bitch."*

I had never gotten to know Frank's family. That night in the church I had glimpsed a woman I was told was his wife. Once in camp I said hello to her. I never saw their child, who very likely was inside their tent when I passed by. When you read a little further in this story, you will see why I wish I could tell you more about them. As for Frank, I hope that I have given you an impression of the man—or his massive presence, his probably salutary micromanagement and heavy-handedness, his vigilance, which went far to keep Safe Ground safe, and his grimness, which could sometimes seem unfriendly. His most fundamental quality was expressed by Annie's friend Jimmy, who said: "He's the fairest man I know."

Jimmy and Annie had nothing but good to say about Safe Ground. But Annie then said: "I been here in the wintertime, and it's gonna be no fun at all. It's gonna be a mud pit."

Farther off the main path was Alan, resident of Sacramento since 1992 and homeless since February. Weakly coughing, white-haired and smooth-faced, he sat cross-legged in his tent, proud owner of a radio, newspapers, and two miniature plastic skeletons dangling from chains of paper clips in order to complement his blue Halloween lights. He said: "I'd been dreadin' about it since before I lost my job. The strength of Safe Ground is being able to leave my stuff somewhere and go about my business, and also I can get a good night's sleep."

For him the two most serious problems were trash and human waste. "We keep calling for trash pickup, but we can't give an address."

He worried about his three camping tickets, which required three separate court dates. Mark had advised him to contest them and demand jury trials.

It was late afternoon. The boughs overhead were half in shadow, half glowing. I knelt on the leaf-strewn tarp that passed for a welcome mat; Alan neither came out nor invited me in, so I did not bother him long on that first occasion. Outside lay a few garbage bags faintly stinking. I saw Ellen and called out a greeting to her. This time she answered pleasantly enough. As so often, she expressed her wish to take a shower. Cecilia passed by, walking heavily and painfully, a single sandal dangling from her hand.

"I'm just coming in from Phoenix," she had said when I first met her. Gray-haired and tanned, she would have passed for a rent-paying citizen. She had sold time-share condominiums for nine years in Mexico. "When I was married, I was Cecily. I had no problems. Now, oh, my. If you don't want to make homelessness your way of life, the professional homeless will give you a hard time. For me, it was lack of planning. I couldn't get a place because I was evicted . . ."

I asked her how long she had been homeless, and she answered: "This time, about two months."

As for Alan, he had been evicted from subsidized housing "for health and safety violations for having a workshop in the house." I thought it tactful not to inquire about this workshop.

Another night: the food givers leaning against the backs of their vehicles beneath the highway overpass, the trees sharp against the yellow sky, huddles of homeless bolting the food on their paper plates, then dispersing into the dusk with their dogs and bicycles. A few of the eaters wore Safe Ground T-shirts—Ellen, for instance, who sometimes could and sometimes could not remember me. The last sun rays made her pale and glowing. Natalie the televangelist was calling out: "Anyone want any toilet paper?" I had been chatting with somebody, so I missed the food she was passing out; I didn't get any spaghetti but I did score a sweet roll, which kept the cold away. I asked Frank if he thought the police would come, and he said: "I know the sergeant. There won't be trouble." Frank was right.

Another skinny person, accompanied by a dog, walked back into the river forest to camp. The last of us sat in a patch of silver-yellow sand, the highway rumbling above our heads. We had eaten, so we were quiet and happy. A smiling man offered me his muffin. Now the cyclists had finished riding away and the rest of us walked into the darkness, whose crickets and cicadas were very loud. Beside me was Angelo, who said he was homeless because he was a procrastinator. He hurt his back, went on working, ended up cooking methamphetamine in Alaska. At the edge of camp I wished him good night, flicked on my flashlight until I had found my sleeping bag, rolled away the two wind-guard rocks, crawled in, and lay listening to the evening voices.

"That's the cleanest fucking shape I ever been in," a man was saying.

"Oregon's a fuckin' desert," said a woman.

"Have you ever been there?" said the man. "It's really great."

A helicopter roared down low over us. Cecilia was bantering with me from her tent, then yawning. The crickets and cicadas were almost roaring. I could see Alan's inverted V of Halloween lights.

"No, I really did see an honest-to-God hobo, down by the coast!"

Then came cigarette smoke, and a tall shape loomed over me. "Who's this here on the ground?"

I said: "It's me, Frank. Okay if I sleep here?"

"Sure. It's okay."

We wished each other good night.

Having brought mosquito repellent every previous time and not needed it, this time I had left it behind and needed it. Oh, well. A train exhaled its harmonica breath. People were still talking and coughing. From the main path fifteen feet away I heard the clink of metal—probably links of a dog chain. Tents hunkered down around me like pallid tombs.

"That's fine, brother," I heard Frank boom. "Just wanted to know who's in those."

A woman was laughing long and happily. A flashlight played inside the tent to the left of Alan's. Annie was chatting with Jimmy.

"My daughter was seven years old," a man said.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, you got any water in your tent?"

"No."

From a nearby tent came a man's voice: "Well, honey, I'm callin', but you have your cell phone turned off. So I guess you're doing something you got no business doing. G'night."

I put in my earplugs. Right through them, from across the path, in the camp to which Ernest had moved, I heard a woman screaming obscenities, and then a man's loud reply: "I—will go—when I'm *damn* ready. Now good night." Flashlights flicked over

me from the trail. I heard Cecilia loudly zipping or unzipping her sleeping bag.

Later that week Mark called me to say that Safe Ground had been raided by the police; the campers were compelled to move. When I set out to look for its new location, I met Ernest, who said: "No, no, *no*. They got raided *when they moved*."

"Why did they move?"

"I dunno. I'm still not with 'em."

"Where are they?"

"Follow the 12th Street path to the path between the two towers. You'll see a path with one brick on it. Take that one."

"Thanks, Ernest. You're the best."

He sent me a lovely metal smile.

The camp was now on soft low meadowy ground; somewhat screened by trees. Along our river, at least where it flows through the city, the strip of ersatz wilderness is never as wide as it appears; and this latest incarnation of Safe Ground lay close to a road the park rangers often patrolled. All the same, the change struck me pleasantly. The grass between the figure eight of tents smelled sweet and fresh, and the ground around them had not yet been beaten down.

Cecilia said: "One of the kids came in to help me with their wagon. The kids are young. But anyway I'm gonna go down to the Hotel Sequoia and try to put in a job application. One of the guys is going to bring me a flashlight. People are very caring here."

Alan, however, was not happy. He sat cross-legged in his tent, showing two deep-reddish-purple sores on his ankle. He had slipped on the path, and his blisters got infected. "I came here after moving myself on that ankle," he said, "and then Frank wants to sit here and have a political talk! We were way over there at Gay Beach, and it hurts. It just blew out. Now, I don't know what they resolved last night about Frank. That lady officer waked me up. I sit down; she gets mad at me for sitting down. We were illegal. Frank took us over to the wrong spot..."

Frank for his part said that he led the Safe Grounders to Gay Beach after being asked to move by rangers. At Gay Beach they got run off, so they settled themselves here. He calmly added that as a result of this latest encounter with authority, he now had to take the bus to Reno to deal with an outstanding warrant.

An older Asian woman named Eunice, who adored Frank, took me aside to catalogue his virtues: "Somebody need to order here, and Frank do a real good job. He should be on his own, but he stay to help us."

As for Alan, she advised, "just whatever he say, just write it off."

"How did you find out about Safe Ground?"

"Well, first I got here from San Francisco, and I don't even know where to stay, and Mary House" at Loaves and Fishes "offer me Safe Ground. They give me tent; they give me sleeping bag. We put up the porta-potties and it'll be much nicer. Time when I was movin' camp it was all right; it was just fine. Rain coming; I'm not used to the rain. Rain, they will give us some tarp. That's all we need; that's okay. Oh, lunchtime, we can go down to Loaves and Fishes. Dinnertime, church come to feed us. So far, everybody do real fine. You follow the order, you do real good. I speak Korean; I speak Japanese; I old lady. I shouldn't be here. But life up and down."

During the move a few of her things had disappeared, but she didn't mind, because they could be replaced.

An older man was saying to a younger: "If you want, I'll give you gloves; I'll show you how to do it." Then the old man raised his voice and said: "Hello, everyone. I'm Jeremy. I'm an elder. I'm pleased to tell you, we now have an operational porta-potty over there. Men, if you need to urinate, do it outside. Women, you can do all your business inside. Eli is the steward of the john. When it's full, I'll change the bag."

A sleek, gray-haired woman with tanned wrists and shoulders and gray-grimed jeans knelt and crept smoothly into her tent. In a moment she came out, carrying a red toilet kit. The grass gave off an almost perfumy smell.

Alan sat in his tent with the flaps open.

I slept at Safe Ground, and in the morning my gate stank of piss. I strolled over to interview Greg Bunker, and when I came back I found that someone had defecated on my doorstep. I had to unlock that gate for a telephone repairman who repaired

nothing, and when I went out to lock it up again, I saw that someone had stolen my garbage can. It was a large one, of the wheeled type; I amused myself with watching its tracks wriggle into the alley. Will you be disappointed in me if I admit to feeling cranky for an hour or two? It did not break me to buy another garbage can. But the fact that I had made up my mind to tolerate such nuisances did not entitle me to demand that my neighboring property owners do the same.

My neighbor told me that once upon a time he had planted roses, and the next day they'd all been stolen.

I passed through downtown just before dawn on a drizzly day, and in the park a dark, wrinkled old woman in a black parka approached me. When I greeted her, she began baying obscenities and threats. Continuing on my way, I thought out what I would do if I heard her running after me, and what I would do if when I turned around I saw a weapon in her hand. For some instants her nasty expressions of hatred for me seemed to be getting louder.

One night when Mark slept down at Safe Ground with me, he left his car in my parking lot. In the morning we found that somebody had cracked Mark's front passenger window with a rock. Mark was sad, and I was sorry for him, but he graciously said: "I've long since gotten over worrying about such things." How would my neighbors have interpreted the incident? Many would doubtless have said: "Well, Bill, you can thank those homeless friends you enable." And they might have been correct; whoever passed through my parking lot at night to break into cars could easily have been a transient, an in-the-bushes sleeper, or not.

On a frosty morning in November, having woken up grateful for my bed, I was doing chores in my parking lot when a woman shambled toward me, weeping. I looked up at her and she focused on me something not unlike the shocking gaze of the British Museum's bronze Anahita (200 to 100 B.C.), whose eye sockets reveal the hollow darkness within her head. She appeared to want to get inside my building. "Who's in there?" she sobbed. "Everyone's in there," I replied; for whenever strangers ask me whom or what my building contains I fob them off in the interest of my security. "Can I see?" asked the woman. "No," I said, working away, "but if you want to, you can talk to me." This made her angry, and she rhetorically wondered why on earth she would want to talk with me, because was I the father of her child? I said that I wasn't. "They've taken away my baby," she said, and staggered away weeping.

I first heard the name Sherwood Forest on the day my friend the butcher, hearing how I sometimes slept down by the river, presented me with seven or eight pounds of neatly wrapped frozen venison steaks, the product of one of his hunts up in Idaho. I considered this a princely gift and could hardly wait to give it to my friends at Safe Ground. Since I knew that the elders did not allow campfires, there was no sense in dragging the meat down to camp to spoil. Dave Moss said God bless me but they couldn't use it, Greg Bunker's freezer was too small (and in the course of his demurral he mentioned that the camp had been required to move yet again, to a place unknown to him, called Sherwood Forest); and Loaves and Fishes, after three phone calls to individuals who either weren't associated with that aspect of addressing homelessness or else worried about health-department regulations, finally sent a pleasant, busy woman to my parking lot in a white van; she didn't turn off the engine, and I passed the bag of meat to her through the window. I think we both agreed that she was doing me a favor. These phone calls had deducted a good hour from my workday, and all the while I'd worried that the venison would thaw. At least it would go to Safe Ground, or so the woman in the white van said. It seemed sad that the butcher and she and I had to go to significant effort for so small a quantity of food. In any event, none of my Safe Ground friends ever remembered getting it.

When I set off to sleep at Sherwood Forest, I was sick and it was raining. Mark had agreed to come, since he knew where Sherwood Forest was. Before setting out, I unrolled my tent for the first time in five years, only to discover that the last person I had lent it to had broken one of the poles. Sighing and sneezing, I laid out the rain fly on my grubby old painter's tarp, folded this sandwich lengthwise, spiderwebbed it round and round with packing tape, stuck my sleeping bag inside, rigged up a shoulder strap for the whole mess from an old pair of suspenders, packed a second tarp, a ball of string, and scissors in my rucksack just in case, and counted myself ready to sleep in the rain. As an afterthought, I took a pair of tent stakes to keep the lip of my shelter-sack off my face.

It was a pretty day of blue fissures between rainy white clouds. Mark called ahead on his cell phone, to have somebody lead us to Sherwood Forest. That was his way of being respectful, I think. The elder who bicycled out to meet us was Jeremy, the same who had been giving toilet instructions. He was a jolly, loquacious sort who seemed to know every comedy movie made. He led us to Sherwood Forest, which turned out to be the same old place by the river where Safe Ground used to be. And just as we got there, the few drops of rain petered out, so that once again I was going to have a lucky sleep.

Frank was gone. It turned out that taking care of that warrant in Reno required serving time. And so my old acquaintance Thirteen, shaven-headed, with his hands in the pockets of his dark jacket, was now laying down the law: "We cannot go over *there* at all. Not unless we're invited. That's La Familia. Porta-potty belongs to them. Oh, yeah. And about those dogs. You have a dog, it comes by my house, we havin' *dog soup*."

This La Familia was, so people told me briefly and sometimes darkly, a splinter group with its own rules. In conspicuous contrast to Safe Ground, which prohibited even the tiniest fire, La Familia had lights, a gas grill, even a flatscreen television. Mark knew somebody over there. The upshot was that we got invited to dinner. The food was simple and good, served on a plate, and even hot, though one of the men who'd cooked it remarked: "After a while out here you don't care whether you eat it hot or cold."

A man of La Familia thought they would be allowed to stay all winter. Mark gave them forty-eight hours.

Ellen, tall, expressive-fingered, remembered me. I asked her how she was, and once again she said she was wish-

come and they'd all got soaked at the other place. Seeing Alan, I inquired about his ankle, and he slowly, indifferently said that it was fine. A psychologist might have said that he often "lacked affect." But what would that mean? He was not indifferent; he was helping Mark set up his tent.

Dusk defined itself through the smell of woodsmoke, the glow from La Familia's generators, the low tents. A blanket hung from a branch. A pretty young woman in a tank top sat on her luggage, unpacking, while other women stood around her shopping cart, laughing and chatting. The light nearly gone.

Somebody said that Annie's friend Jimmy was going back east because he had cancer. I was flirting with Cecilia when Eli announced to us that he had just had the happiest day ever because until now he had been very lonely but he had just rescued a dog, whose name would be Sister. Cecilia told me that Eli was sixteen. He had heard about Safe Ground from his best friend, Cowboy, who had been hit by a car and died.

There was a wide, brown-faced, sweating man who kept hitting me up for cigarettes because he was addicted, begging me for marijuana because he was addicted; he showed me his identification photo to prove it. He kept asking everybody for money. He tried to get cigarettes from Jeremy, who laughingly commended his sincerity, then withdrew into his tent. He followed me around and interrupted conversations, whispering that I reminded him of somebody, perhaps his brother-in-law. I was sorry for him, disliked him, shrugged him off, and forgot him. He found others to whom he clung. I had expected to meet many people like him at Safe Ground; in fact he was the only one.

After dark, he tried to stab Thirteen with a screwdriver. "The boys" of La Familia who were hosting us stood up from their dinner, eighty-sixed him from Safe Ground for life, packed him up, and moved him a hundred and fifty yards downriver. Thirteen came into



SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY PUZZLE

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NOTES FOR "GREMLINS":

*Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Note: * indicates an anagram.*

The word in the clue containing the misprint is included with each answer.

ACROSS: 1. AT(temp)T's (cries); 7. * (heed); 10. hidden in reverse (matter); 11. * (cap); 13. bee-t (plant); 14. spring-boards (lives); 17. pur(pl)e (rid); 19. Cong-a (Dante); 20. to(m-ca)t (per); 21. * (bards); 23. tog(rev.)-as (sheen); 25. ass-ail (strife); 26. cons-tric(k)-tors* (boat); 30. t(o)Rip(ley) (shill); 31. mi(D)st (luring); 32. * (dried); 33. (Go)d-ray(rev.) (Ares); 34. lop(rev.)-Y-gam(e)-Y (carried)

DOWN: 1. (M)arch (sump); 2. to-(A)pple (loan); 3. chor(in)es (Shaw); 4. * (fare); 5. * (peel); 6. trap, rev. (bit); 7. * (blaze); 8. rev. (end); 9. S.O.B.(rev.)-siest(a) (overhearing); 12. homonym (meal); 15. hidden (setter); 16. * (carts); 18. * (blooper); 22. * (Beck); 24. aort(I)c* (hears); 27. two mngs. (rice); 28. homonym (Dow); 29. t-hey (otters)

the lamplight sweating, his face nearly as yellow as the canned corn in the pot under the generator light. "The boys" announced that he had two hours off. He sat down with us and ate dinner, watching a movie on their flatscreen television. He was very quiet, and when I told him that I was glad he was all right, he did not answer.

Now it was late—eight o'clock, maybe. I laid myself down in the dirt on my belly, with tents glowing palely around me, wrinkle-stained the texture of translucent flesh, and people murmuring on their cell phones or rustling in their tents. A long train hooted by, and then came a helicopter. The sky was darker between the tree branches than it had been on the first night, and the cold air stung my nostrils. Someone was listening to the radio in the next tent (country music and commercials); that would never have been tolerated at this hour when Frank was in charge. Small dogs yelped. People coughed. The air smelled clean, probably on account of the rain.

Just before I fell asleep, a shy man bent down by me and gave me a coffee candy.

When we had first come into the generator light, one of La Familia's dogs, a dachshund–pit bull mix, began to snarl at me, but I stopped to look into the animal's eyes, and then a young woman who politely declined to be photographed because she was pagan (an alumna of a coven in southern California) spoke to it, and it quieted at once. I stroked its head, and it watched me with what seemed to be an understanding patience. Then it nuzzled my ankle. Partway through dinner, when the addict tried to attack Thirteen, and "the boys" all rose up to help, the dogs barked and bayed until the pagan woman calmed them, explaining to me: "They know something's up with the boys. They want to be over there to back them up." It was not until I was ensconcing myself for sleep, like a worm in an apple, that I began to think through the implications. Since Thirteen's attacker was only a hundred and fifty yards away, I wondered whether he would make a vengeance raid. But someone said that the dogs would remember the man's scent, which they would have linked with the smells of the hyped-up boys and of Thirteen when he came to La Familia, worn out and shaken. As soon as he said that, I instantly believed it to be true. The dogs never barked when people passed in and out of camp in the middle of the night, conducting urinary errands. I remembered that when I had slept in the Lutheran church, one woman had told me that her dog was staying in her tent at the river, guarding her property and trusting in her to come back. Being allergic to furry animals, and therefore not knowing them well, I had always, so it now began to seem, underestimated the capabilities of dogs, whose middle-class owners sometimes spoiled them, pretending that they were children; and children they did become in the worst sense: ill-mannered, vicious, and cowardly. But this Safe Ground river life might well bring out the best in them.

I telephoned Mark to see if he wanted to come and be homeless, because it was a Tuesday, the best day; sweet Natalie would appear beneath the 12th Street bridge to give us good food. I was lucky enough to catch him at a court recess. He told me that a night or two before there had been "an incident" in a neighboring camp—violence, evidently, to which the police responded by informing everyone in all camps, including Safe Ground, that they would have to move. Accordingly, there would be a march today from Loaves and Fishes to City Hall.

Safe Ground lurched from crisis to crisis, as if everybody stood in a circle with their arms around one another's shoulders, awaiting the stone that would strike this elder's head, that woman's neck; and then they would support the staggerer until he recovered himself sufficiently to help his brothers and sisters again. Come to think of it, I guess we all do live that way ourselves, being mortal, but our crises are rarer and more attenuated in proportion to our income.

Beneath a half-moon in the blue and white sky they were all sitting quite calmly on the red-painted curb in front of Loaves and Fishes, flinging orange sparks off their cigarette-ends. Eunice didn't know me until I bowed to her, then jumped up and hugged me. Alan was abstracted. Ellen greeted me politely, Tracey smiled at me, Buzz shook my hand, and Cecilia gave me a hug. I asked after Eli, the one with the dog named Sister; Cecilia said that he had been eighty-sixed for using meth. As for the "incident" that Mark had mentioned, Eunice told me that on Sunday night someone had gotten stabbed in the camp just across the path, the one that had always been so loud. In consonance with her veneration of the Safe Ground authority structure, she rightly or wrongly believed that the victim would have died had it not been for the elders, who gave him first aid and telephoned for help. First the rangers came, and then the police. The next day, said Cecilia, a white notice appeared upon every tent at Safe Ground: forty-eight hours to move. Just when this forty-eight hours began I could not exactly determine, because although half of the camp had already relocated to a place Eunice called Hope Camp (and that the others named Camp Hope), some people did not plan to move until Friday or Saturday. Eunice said that the remainder were awaiting the elders' decision regarding where to go. "It's in God's hands," a woman told me. "Anyway, I'm out of California in nine days."

"Hey, everyone! All of you with bikes and backpacks, Alan's gonna stay out in front. Alan will watch your stuff."

We stood up, and off we went in a slow calm line, down the grimy fenced-off runway of sidewalk below a pretty pinkish cloud, past people who sat or lay on cardboard, and around one heaped-up shopping cart that stank a little, past the never-busy adult bookstore, while starlings wheeled around the power lines in the salmon-colored sky. Nobody held any signs. One man said to another: "You did exactly the same thing for the Marines that I did." Descending beneath the railroad overpass where years ago, behind those coils of razor wire, a homeless man had helped me try to catch out on a freight train (a cop had busted us), we walked toward the red-orange beads of car-lights. Mark's characterization of this walk as a march was, I should say, an overstatement. As we entered the downtown one unseen voice up in front listlessly called out: "What do we want? Safe Ground!" and two or three people joined in; then the

chant died. At least none of them seemed grim or even cheerless. Perhaps it felt to them like one more necessary chore. In twenty minutes we had arrived at City Hall. Filing into the bright lobby, we encountered some sort of glitzy meet-and-greet, whose happy-voiced, expensively dressed participants pretended not to see us while we wound through them to the metal detector.

The city-council chamber was mostly empty. Here came the mayor, as handsome and personable as ever, pressing random flesh: "Good to see you, Dwight. You're ..."

Cecilia, very tanned, her gray hair nicely braided, complained to me about Thirteen. He was too bossy, it appeared. She said that when Safe Ground began to reconstitute itself at Camp Hope, others were already tenting there, including a girl who had done some time for attempted murder; Safe Ground had eighty-sixed her for some other reason; and now Thirteen informed her she had to move because the toilet had to go where she was; she flew into a rage; but another woman who had also been eighty-sixed approached the girl and sweetly said: "Can I help you put up your tent?"

Next, Cecilia complained about La Familia. "They're a bunch of thugs. They wear ankle bracelets."

Cecilia then said that last week Frank's wife had been beaten to death in a hotel in Oklahoma. In her blood the murderer had scrawled on the wall: PAYBACK. This detail, like the rumor of Natalie's arrest, might or might not have been an embellishment, but everyone agreed that Frank's wife had been murdered, which was awful enough. Their dog, Sherman, was still at Safe Ground. Nobody knew what had happened to the child.

Cecilia went on: "Now, Frank, I understand he's doing sixteen months. I doubt if we'll ever see Frank again." He was back within three weeks.

Here came Eunice in her blue parka, leaning on her cane. I felt happy when she sat beside us.

In the row ahead of us sat high-cheekboned Belinda, whose nephew had been in the Army unit that discovered Saddam Hussein in his spider hole. I asked her how the nephew had felt when Saddam was executed, and she said: "He felt pretty good. He's a badass."

Cecilia said: "Belinda, I need you and these ladies to come up with me when I speak."

"I'd be honored."

"Edna, will you come up with us?"

Tall pale Edna, who called herself a werewolf, was part Cherokee, and frequently liked to tell me that should anybody molest my child, the molester should be tied between two trees, bullwhipped, and then introduced to a rattlesnake. "I'd like to give them a piece of my mind!" she said, clenching her jaw. "They should have left us alone."

"No, don't do that," coaxed Cecilia. "Leave it alone."

The back rows of the council chamber were now filling up with homeless, who took off their jackets, filling the air with the smell of old clothes, wet wool, and stale sweat. There might have been a hundred of them, although I recognized only a few from Safe Ground.

We all placed our hands on our hearts for the Pledge of Allegiance, which all performed with considerable sincerity. Next came some ceremonial mumbo-jumbo for an amiable old gentleman of former importance, followed by a sister-city presentation. Reader, aren't you delighted to know that Bethlehem is Sacramento's (ninth) sister city? And our mayor now received a white-wrapped present from Bethlehem! A representative of the Korean sister city of Yongsan-gu spoke at moderate length. Then the lady in charge of sister cities talked on and on; entitled individuals are never subject to any time limit. There came a consideration of placing a "sister city directional sign" in City Hall's plaza. Were you wondering how many miles it is from Sacramento to Bethlehem? The council appeared to be in favor.

Now at last it came time for public comment: each speaker was allotted two minutes or less.

The first homeless speaker was a young man whose voice could barely be heard. "I did want to speak on the behalf of Safe Ground," he said to the council members staring blearily and mopping their faces. The homeless man rambled feebly on. "We need your final comments," said the mayor.

Next came a man who introduced himself and his friend Mike. He said: "I myself was a foster child. They throw us away at eighteen. If it wasn't for Safe Ground, foster children like my little brother would have no place to go. Safe Ground is a family. It is not just Safe Ground, it is a family."

The aged homeless man near me wiped his eyes.

Now Cecilia came forward, with half a dozen other homeless women around her. She said: "I am residing at Safe Ground and I am a single woman and I am a grandmother. We don't take in people; we *welcome* people. It's safe for me; it's safe for all of us. It's not me being homeless; it's us being homeless," her voice breaking. She was the best speaker of any of them. She talked about the owls at night, and how lovely the forest could be at dawn. She ended with nearly thirty seconds to spare. "Thank you, Cecilia," said the mayor in his charming way.

Last came Gerry, a black man, skinny in a grubby hooded parka too large for him, sighing: "I would like to speak on behalf of Safe Ground," in an almost inaudible voice. "It's not me, it's we. We're tired of harassment from law enforcement. All the people who has died for this country, we're kind of spitting in their face for not giving us even a piece of ground to sleep on ..."

None of the homeless asked for anything, not even for Safe Ground to be left alone.

The next day at midday, which felt like late afternoon, some dogs were arguing like crows, and a fresh apple lay forgotten behind a log. Many tents were already gone from Sherwood Forest, which had begun to stink. La Familia had dismantled itself first, I was told. A woman slowly, carefully roped a tarp-roofed pile of unknowns onto her bicycle trailer. Someone in a green Safe Ground T-shirt was slowly bagging her belongings. A chair creaked; people chatted. Nobody was hurrying. A fly crawled on a yellow leaf. The wind was cool.

Cecilia worried about the possessions of a friend of hers who had appendicitis. Eunice had already taken his tent, against, so Cecilia said, specific instructions to the contrary; Cecilia was worried that Eunice might mean to keep it for herself. I helped Cecilia move her friend's property to Camp Hope, carrying all but the front wheel of his bicycle on my shoulder; and found myself back in the old place

from which they had supposedly been flooded out—although back in Sherwood Forest a man who used to ride the freights now assured me that that other place had never flooded at all.

Cecilia and I set up her friend's tent, and at the end another man came to help us. Then we hunted up Eunice, who called her honey but Cecilia wasn't buying it. I myself thought that Eunice had been innocently helpful. "She had no business doing this," Cecilia repeated. "He is *not* sellin' it to her."

Back in Sherwood Forest, a man gave me a candy bar, and Edna told me that she was sure the mayor had listened to them last night. I said I doubted that and then felt guilty, because Edna looked sad.

"Anybody ready to go right now?"

"That's yours. Look at how you broke it down; that's good."

Now here on his bike came Alan, who said that they had met with the watch commander on the north side of the river. Impressed because they had been the ones to call the cops after the stabbing, the commander was said to have offered to send out a patrol twice a week "to see what they needed." I suppose this offer could have been friendly or ominous. Alan for his part was quite pleased. He said that one of the seniormost park rangers had confided that while he couldn't advise them as to where to camp, he might let them know which places were in his experience least likely to flood. Not having been present at this conference, I supposed that authority's encouragement in this instance, if indeed any had been expressed, was about as much to be relied upon as La Familia's impression that they would be allowed to stay in Sherwood Forest until spring. But who knows? Perhaps the watch captain and the old ranger both subscribed to the view that Mark once expressed to a reporter: "The city council should realize that it costs more to persecute the homeless than it does to permit them to establish encampments from which they can address their staggering problems."

The rain came. On a damp knoll in sight of the 12th Street bridge, Thirteen and some friends were smoking marijuana. I told them I was bringing more books to Safe Ground, and they groaned in disgust. A black woman named Cassie, whose hand was bandaged because she had punched a tree, led the way to Camp Hope, which had swelled considerably; they told me that today a hundred and fifteen souls were in residence. Cassie then vanished among the many-galled oak trees without a parting word. The place had a harder or at least more serious feeling about it than before, perhaps because there were so many strangers living there and passing through, and partly on account of the weather. It smelled of smoke and wet leaves. I did not feel especially welcome, although the books were all chosen and carried off with thanks. I wish I could describe to you the way that some of them looked at me, hoping to get something, or wishing I would go away, or both. Their tents were all covered with tarps or rain flies, so that they resembled smooth-wrinkled river boulders. They seemed closer together than I remembered.

Alan's front door was open to the gray sky. He was sitting inside his tent on his full-size blowup mattress, and his arms were folded. Everything was neatly organized in there, although he had not yet rigged up his Christmas lights. (Against him one of his neighbors bitterly alleged that he received a thousand dollars every month and never shared; that was why he had such a fine setup. Thus the camaraderie of small communities.) I asked how he was managing in the rain. "We're not gonna flood till you start seeing puddles," he replied. "That's gonna be January or February." After a moment he came out onto his vinyl veranda to chat. He stood up. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his green army-style jacket. An unopened can of clam chowder was at his feet.

"I'm lookin' out there and I think our next wave's comin' in," he said, indicating the clouds.

He didn't know where Cecilia or Eunice might be living; it was as if he'd never heard of them. Edna thought they might be with La Familia, which I doubted, given what Cecilia had said about that organization. Edna explained to the woman I was with exactly how to punish whomever might molest our children. I walked in the direction Edna had suggested and did not see anyone familiar. The tents quickly became more solitary and unfriendly-seeming. No one seemed to know me. Well, it had been more than a week since I'd last slept at Safe Ground. I reached a big blue awning in the trees, with tents huddled beneath; probably this was La Familia, but it would have been inappropriate to approach uninvited.

The rain began, softly at first. A man in a wool cap was kneeling before the entrance to his home, tying something shipshape. Another man fed a long stick under his awning, trying to make a roof beam before more rain came. A little white poodle flashed anxiously into a tent. A woman was gently setting a spider outside. Birdsongs and rain, dogs barking, Edna showing off her knife, people rustling beneath their tarps, the breathless groaning of a helicopter, a garbage bag hanging from a tree branch, a pile of garbage between two tents, a woman slowly placing one foot in front of the other while the rain drizzled down her lined face, a man in a camouflage jacket striding resolutely out of camp, his boots sinking silently into the path's wet leaves, all these seemed very new to me. I almost began to understand how little I knew about these people and how they lived.

I walked away. The wild grape leaves had gone yellow in the past two or three days. Thirteen and his friends were gone. The rain was strengthening, and it was getting dark. Downtown, men in hooded raincoats walked the sidewalks; rain ran down their shoulders and darkened their bedrolls.

Thirteen got eighty-sixed, Mark said for drugs and Cecilia said for intimidation. By then the authorities had decided to send Safe Ground packing again. In a reversal of Alan's story, Cecilia now said the police would have let them stay while the rangers declared they had to go.

Cecilia and I met by coincidence in the street and had coffee together. The next day, I met a friend and he said: "Did you see yesterday's newspaper? Two homeless murdered down by the river."

I laid out the remains of my tent in the corner of my parking lot, with the stakes on top. In two hours it was gone. ■