

Norm Hughes

I've never hit rock bottom before, but one summer I sure did find it. I was a stranger. He was a stranger too. The only difference was he had something important to say, so I listened.

I woke up with a yawn and a stretch, a crick in my neck, as my wristwatch beeped. Light was just beginning to descend upon this sea breeze city, and I could tell there was a chill in the air. Sitting there I stared at myself in the rearview mirror, a drained and defeated look upon my face. I stayed in the back seat for the next five minutes, trying to collect myself.

Shedding my sleeping bag I opened the door, and a flood of cold air filled the car, my lungs, my life. The first few nights had me hopping around on the frigid pavement, but after more than a month of this I stood erect, my feet whining, but not willing to give in. I rummaged through the back seat, moving to the front, lifting up old items of clothing, and discarded food wrappers before finding my stale jeans, a shirt caked in dust, and an over worn work jacket. I laced up my boots and shut the door, walking away from my parking lot and home.

No matter what street, roadside, or lot the car would remain while I was at work, I couldn't help but wonder. *Would it get towed? Would there be a ticket on the window when I got*

*back? Would someone break in and steal the remainder of my material life?* I almost wanted this to happen, at least then I'd know something had been valuable.

The time it took to walk to the bus depot, wait for a bus, and then take the drawn out stop and go process to work was never any fun for me. Most mornings threatened I'd fall back asleep and possibly miss my stop, or I would sit there and stew in my month long predicament. Missing my stop was the risk and option I found more favorable. In any case, I always left for work too early.

The sun began to shine through the mist, clearing the path in front of me. But I burrowed deeper into my jacket, waiting for the warmth to kick in. As I took up the usual path towards the bus station, there he was on the bridge over the creek, as if he never left it.

Sometimes he was sitting on the sidewalk, or leaning against the steel rail, or dangerously close to falling back off it. There were always various objects with him, a sack of what I assumed held a mixture of dirty clothes, maybe some cart with wheels, odd knick knacks and things he must have found while wandering around. I had guessed he lived under the bridge and that was where he kept most of what ever objects he needed to claim.

His garb was mostly the same, big baggy jeans with random holes that only gave way to what looked like more pants underneath. He had an array of shirts but the smell and look to them has them run together as something only a washing machine would eventually distinguish. Apart from his thick, heavy jacket, and a cap that pulled back most of his long, greasy, gray hair, his beard was the only thing that looked like he kept in a somewhat presentable fashion.

The first few times through the month he didn't take notice of me, a regular street shuffler, "Spare any change?" he'd gruffly say, never expecting much so early. I didn't have much to give. After a few days I guess he began to wise up, the troll to my crossing. He became suspicious, checking the clock tower silently, making a note that I crossed 5 days a week at 5:45AM. His silence and suspicion melted away eventually. Some days gave way to smiles, friendly hellos, and remarks about the weather.

I never wanted to stop and talk. I was timid, shy, perhaps too scared at how close I was to becoming someone like him. But for some reason I never chose another path. He was a part of my routine as much as I was of his now.

But today was different, his stance showed it. He seemed to almost be blocking the sidewalk path, prepared to make some statement. Before I came to him, he had already opened his mouth, a small engine rattling away in his chest spewing words, perpetual cigarette smoke, and filth.

"Hey, naw woah there young fella. Where you always off to at this hour? Don't chu know the city still sleeps. How come you wake?"

I resisted the urge to ask, "Well how come you're awake this hour?" It would have been rude.

"Well I've got work to get to. I have to catch the bus."

Both of these statements were lies. Work didn't start until 8:00AM, but when you are living out of a car, sleeping-in doesn't exactly become a luxury any more. Getting up and occupying my mind with work was better than sitting in my Ford Disappointment, feeling sorry

for myself. And I couldn't find the guts to drive up to campus every day, park and have co-workers or students stare at the filthy kid locking up his house-sedan. The bus was free with my student ID, and I was low on gas.

I don't think anyone at work knew how I was living. And I wanted to avoid and questions and keep it that way. It was hard enough to hear these young, yet-to-graduate kids talk about their classes, holding on to this purpose and energy. An exciting future awaited them, or so they thought. I simply didn't want to dampen their spirits as the guy who graduated but never left.

My boss was nice enough, but whenever he invited people out afterwards to grab a drink or head to his house, I declined. In the past I had said yes, but that was when I had a shower and change of clothes, ashamed to show up to a place still smelling like sweat, mud, fertilizer, and whatever other muck I had under my finger nails.

“Ah you catchin' the bus ta work.” He opened his grayish dead eyes wide, lifting his slouching brows a bit to stare hard into me. “But what exactly is the work that you do?” he continued, glancing me up and down looking at the rags I was wearing.

Even to a complete stranger I was embarrassed at my appearance, and felt I had to explain myself. “I'm a groundskeeper up on campus.”

“Ha, keeper of the grounds hmm, boy you can't keep no grounds.” He laughed a little more, as if it were a joke. I wasn't sure what to respond with, or why I was still even having this conversation.

“Yeah, I uhh, go around mowing lawns, pruning plants, raking leaves, you know outdoors

stuff to keep the campus clean, um pick up garbage, dig ditches...”

“You wanna learn a thing or two from me?” he said with a grin, spreading to my surprise with a full mouth of teeth, even if they were all yellowish brown. He did not wait for me to reply, “There ain't no way you ever gonna keep nature clean. She's a dirty girl. Let'er have it, enjoy her, or y'll be digging another ditch sooner than ya want.”

I paused and made the connection he was getting at. “True, very true, I'll think about that on my bus ride. But I better be going.”

Apparently he didn't hear me, or simply he just wanted to keep the conversation going, because his next question caught me off guard. He flat out just said it. “How come you always leave so dirty?”

I repeated my answer, “Well working on campus as a groundskeeper, under the sun all day, down on the ground and such, you are bound to get dirty, ya know.”

“No, naw, naw I know you get dirty, how come you *always* dirty though? I seen you up and down this street over this bridge for plenty a days now and every one of 'em you dirty. What, your machine washer broke or something?”

He was getting closer to a topic I would rather not have with him. Was it because I felt it would be awkward, or because it meant acknowledging it?

“Oh, you know, why put on clean clothes if you're gonna get 'em dirty again doing the same ole thing.”

“I'd wear clean clothes.” he replied, almost quieting the words as they came out, a frustrated smile on his face.

I winced at what I had said, standing in the silence between us, unsure what to do next.

“Let me ask you something,” he said, popping out of his trance.

“Yeah?” I felt obliged to answer him.

“What's one of your biggest regrets in life?”

“I don't know... I don't think I have any regrets,” I quickly spat out, unwilling to venture down this territory. My brain was sputtering, blindsided, *Where did that come from? Was this man simply crazy?*

“No, look back, really, what's that one thing you feelin' terrible about? A do-over thought.”

I tried to prevent the thought from spilling over, but whatever I came up with in order to dam it quickly broke. My head was stuck on repeat, sloshing around the same thing that gave me hard cold nights in the back of my car.

As the thought burst through I grew angry at myself, angry that such a random question from such a random person could penetrate my defenses. The one thing that consumed and defeated me was what he got to the heart of so easily. I wanted to yell at him, “Turning into you! This is my biggest regret! Getting evicted the summer after graduation because I trusted someone with my rent checks who was using them for drugs and then skipped town leaving me with the bill, and now I am stuck in this town where all my friends have left to go on to bigger and better things, and I'm sleeping in a car that's technically not even mine, working a manual labor job at the place I left, trying to save up as much as I can so I can pay back what is owed and leave with my tail behind my legs, too stubborn, stupid, embarrassed, and ashamed to ask for help, or tell

my parents. That's what I regret, this hole in my life. This lie that I am living!"

But as this anger welled up, he knew, and softly barked, "Not now, think back."

I stared up at the clock tower over downtown in the distance, and took a breath. It was 6:10AM. I could spare some time and indulge this man. And for whatever reason, this memory popped into my head and I immediately fell into the story.

It wasn't a great memory, but still it brought a smile to my lips. He seemed pleased at the reaction, almost resting back a bit, an ease taking over the situation.

"I was thirteen, and my Dad wanted to take me on a backpacking trip." I paused and took a breath again. It was all coming back so strong now, regardless of how far I had buried it. "He was excited to be a dad, a good one. He didn't have one when growing up so he planned all these little day trips and games. I guess the summer after I turned thirteen he felt I was ready. It was like some test of manhood, or maturity, or simply some father son time. He planned this backpacking trip."

I looked up at the homeless man to see if he was listening, to see if he was just crazy, to see if I had maybe brought up something in him when speaking about my own father.

"Go on nah," was all he urged.

I nodded. "So, he showed me the map, told me how many miles, how many days, what we would pack, all these different things that needed to get done in time." I chuckled, "We even began going on warmup hikes. After work and school going on hikes testing mileage and wearing our packs and boots to break them in and get used to the weight. We had such a great time prepping for this trip. My younger brothers were so jealous, but he promised them they'd

get a trip too. My mom felt like it was too early for me, but he said I'd be fine. I was so excited.”

With these thoughts reoccurring, it struck me that I hadn't spoken to my family in a while. In the midst of this story, all of a sudden I was wondering how they were, or what they had been up to. The last month or so had me so ashamed I just couldn't bare lying to them. We may have talked every so often, but it's not like I ever gave them any new news, simply stating the same old stuff. I didn't want them to worry. This was my problem, even if I knew they could and would help. My stubbornness and pride wouldn't allow it. At this point my parents thought I was just a graduate soaking up some summer fun after college.

I had gone too deep in a different direction. The homeless man, shifted, providing a rumble, before asking further, “Ok, so you're gettin' ready for the trip. What's the problem?”

“Oh sorry. I was just thinking about my Dad for a second. Umm yeah, everything was set, we drove out into the mountains, found the trail head, parked the car, and we never looked behind us. I remember the start of that first day and everything just felt so right, you know?”

I wasn't sure if my question was hypothetical or not, but he answered it all the same, “I getcha, father son starts like that, always a good time. I know it.”

“Yeah, so that first hike had us bouncing along the trail, pointing things out, making notes of what we saw, heard, smelled, felt, everything. There were moments where we shared this silence and let nature envelop us. But there were also moments where we talked openly and deeply about our lives. I of course was only thirteen but still I had my share of fears and joys in



the world. I think what I was most surprised to hear was how my Dad opened up about his own fears and dreams. There was this new connection, and I think this was the first time I wasn't just his son, some kid, but almost an adult, someone who could listen, speak, approach a topic and understand, an equal of sorts.”

The homeless man had his brown grin on again, slapping his knee to the effect, as if saying, *Boy how is this a regret! Crazy kid.*

“Well, after a break or two, lunch, and something like ten miles later we checked the map and had made it to our night one campsite. The first day was a huge success. I remember my Dad had begun to set up the tent, and he had asked me to go collect fire wood. I can still see his face when I returned, he was so proud, just beaming. He gave me a swig from his flask, a little celebratory scotch sip we were to share every night we advanced. The taste was leathery but sweeter than I expected, but maybe that's because we were both so happy. He had said he was going to unpack certain things, and double check some stuff, but asked if I wanted to start dinner. I couldn't believe he was giving me this job, there was no way I was going to let him down.”

“Alright now, yeah, tell me it was sometin' good. Gotta be after a first night like that huh.”

“It was. I mean, food wise we had dried this and that, packages bought at a store, everything saved up. But for night one, to christen the start of our journey, my Dad had brought two steaks. The best food we were going to get for a week. I was surprised to find out we weren't going to have any vegetables with it. But as I made the fire all I wanted was that t-bone to sink

my teeth into and gnaw.

The homeless man made a lip smacking sound, followed by a couple “mmm-mmmm's.” I realized it had probably been a while since he had eaten steak.

“So I was crouching next to the fire, and my Dad was still in the tent rolling out the sleeping bags, letting me carry on without interrupting. I tended to the meat, glowing at the satisfaction of my fire. Sitting there my head filled with the next day, and the next day, a continuing thought of fun, with watering holes, fishing lines, climbing up a little mountain on the way, like every day was a new Christmas morning. Everything had been planned and I just couldn't wait. But I . . . but I dropped the steaks.”

The homeless man leaned back a bit, as if understanding why I had begun this story now. His lips jutted out and he nodded with a look of disappointment on his face, or maybe it was sympathy.

“I dropped the steaks,” I repeated, letting the words hit me again. “I had cooked them perfectly and in my sheer excitement and bliss I forgot the potholder and grabbed the cast iron pan with my hand. Immediately I dropped it into the flames, the pan turning face down, covering the steaks.

“The shock was so unreal. I didn't think anything like this could happen, but I just stared at what I had done, drained of any and all happiness, quiet. I didn't know I could go from one feeling to the next so drastically, it hurt, euphoria taken over by pain, then again it was probably because I burned my hand.”

I paused the story and looked at that hand, flexing the muscles and closing the fingers,

seeing the light outline of scarring that served as a mental reminder rather than a physical one.

“So what'd you end up doing?” the homeless man earnestly asked.

I flashed back to the pain. “Well I kicked the pan out of the fire, stirring up a cloud of ash, grit, dirt, and wood. The steaks were burning with flames dancing all over them. I took the grill fork and stabbed a steak and set it down in the pan on the ground, then the next one. I shook them, patted them down, tried to get off as much of the crap as I could, but the damage was done. They were smoldering, as if they had been trampled. I remember the gravity of the situation and what I had done, but still naively as a kid, I thought there had to be a way to turn back the clock and right the situation. But after five minutes I lifted the tent flap.

“My Dad sat there, looking over the map with a flashlight and asked me if the steaks were done. He made a remark about how great it smelled. But all I could say was that there had been an accident. I felt like a kid who had peed the bed after a nightmare. I kept using the word accident as if that would make it any better.”

“Was he angry?” the homeless man piped up.

“No, no, he was a good dad like I said. He wasn't mad. He made the most of it. But I remember sitting there staring at these pathetic steaks, cutting into mine and taking a bite as if to show him that it was ok, but immediately crunching into this black, acrid, bitter taste. I had given my Dad what I thought was the better of the two, but I knew it didn't matter now.

“I was so hungry after our hike, but I tried another bite and couldn't get it down, slowly chewing it over as if it were a punishment. And the whole time my Dad ate is as if it were any other steak. But I wasn't sure if he was doing this to show me everything was ok, or because he

was truly hungry, or some combination of both. I put my plate down on the ground and went to bed, and as I zipped the tent flap up I saw my father reach for my plate and cut into it, getting rid of my evidence.

My eyes were closed, and apparently a few minutes had gone by before they blinked open. The sun was hitting my face, and the homeless man still leaned against the bridge, intently waiting and listening. People were awake now, and more and more were walking the streets, going to work, or school. None of them who passed by paid us any attention, but I wondered if they thought anything of me talking to this man.

From where I left off I continued, “There were no stories that night, no laughing, no singing around the fire, howling at the moon. No, I simply got into my sleeping bag, still wearing my sweaty, dirty, clothes, letting the pain of my hand take over my thoughts until exhaustion took over embarrassment.

The homeless man made a low whistling noise towards our feet.

“I wish that was the end of it. Some time in the middle of the night a great thunderstorm hit over head. It shook the ground, rattled the tent, drowned the whole world outside. I don't think either of us got any more sleep that night. When we rose to set out, all through our soggy breakfast, and packing of the tent there was no way to stay dry. I was miserable. My hand had swollen pretty bad but there was no way I was going to let my father see it. I was trying to stay strong, to buck up, and make the most of things, but maybe a mile into the hike, I just stopped. I told my dad I couldn't go on any longer. I didn't want to do this any more.

“I remember not being able to look at him, too afraid that I was hurting him. But all he

said was, "If that's what you want. Let's go back." "

"Through most of our return it rained, and when it wasn't raining I was crying quietly. The steaks, my hand, the pain, the soreness, how tired I was, the rain, all of it was cycling through my head. It didn't help that when the rain let up a little bit I thought how selfish or weak I was. Foolishly, I hoped, maybe we could carry on now, maybe we could turn around and start over, but my Dad said we had come too far. I pleaded with him a bit, telling him if he wanted to continue he should do it, or force me. We can keep going now, I'll be fine. But he said it was too late, we were too far, and that it was ok.

"We made it back to the car, piled everything in the back and silently drove into the night. I tried to fall asleep in the passenger seat but my eyes were wide, and my hand still stung. I wanted to be more than his son but the man of yesterday again, not this stupid little boy. I didn't want him to think I couldn't do it, and that this was his wrong decision."

"Ain't nothin' wrong about it. Sounds like your dad loves you."

"I know. I know he does. And as it turned out, later on the news we saw that the thunderstorm had been stalking us, and that it would have hiked the whole trip with us. That still didn't make me feel any better. I felt like I had brought the clouds, and let my Dad down. He's never held it against me, but I've always held it against myself."

"Yea-hea and?" The homeless man was now getting at something I was obviously missing.

"And, what? That's it I guess, my regret."

"No, that's not it. Why don't you call him up, get another trip, go out and rectify things? If

you feel so damn bad about it, why don't you tell him, and then feel good?"

"It's not that easy. I have things to do here, he has work, he's not as young as he was. There are all these things in the way now. Believe me, no offense, but I have to figure stuff out here right now."

"Sounds to me you're the only thing in your own damn way kid."

I wanted to be insulted by this, and my mouth was open ready to fire back. But he was right, so I shut it.

Instead he extended a big grimy paw and said, "The name's Norm, Norm Hughes."

"Grant," I said wearily, not giving him my last name.

He didn't seem to mind. Some part of me, even after this whole story felt awkward, apprehensive giving him my last name. I don't know why I held on to it.

"Naw if my daddy were still alive, I'd give him a call right this minute. I'd take whatever I have left in this pocket here for him. But no change can change that. I'll tell ya though, and you listen good, ya know Grant, you know who you remind me of?"

I stared with a quizzical look on my face not ready for what he was about to say next.

"You remind me of me at your age."

Motionless, I stood there, scared at his astute observation and possible condemnation.

But Norm just kept talking, "I seen you in your car, around 'n such. I know where you're headed, and I don't mean direction wise. Life wise son, life wise. Swallow your fears, take away that pride, don't be such a stubborn jackass. Boy you got one hell-of-a regret there, at least you can solve it, don't make this regret you're living now become the next one. Yeah, you remind me

*Norm Hughes*

of me,” he repeated, and that same brown-yellow, wide smile grew. He then said exactly what I needed to hear, “It’s ok, it’s ok, you’re not me yet.”