

## AT THE LIGHT ON 17 AND KING

The day we meet, I'm passing through the outer limits of the city, late for work as usual and peeved when I have to stop short at the light on 17 and King. I've gotten a ticket for sliding through a yellow-red in this very spot and I don't have time to check for cops, so I hit the brakes with a chirp and come to a full stop.

He's standing there, like a person who wants to cross the street, wearing a sign strung up with twine and hanging from his neck—HOMELESS written in big black letters. He's thin as a sapling, sandy-haired, with dreary slumped shoulders. In his twenties, maybe, though his demeanor is neither young nor old but something blurred and in between. Seeing him makes me wonder how such a young man (surprisingly young, really) gets to this point—what are the steps that brought him to this place?

Our eyes meet, just a flicker of a connection, but it throws me—like he sees me too clearly. A second later, without thinking, I reach for my purse, for the personnel badge inside. It's not only an I.D. but the key to raise the parking lot's mechanical blockade—I'm fifteen to twenty minutes late and will need it to get into the lot—but the homeless man doesn't know what I'm reaching for. And in the short time it takes me to pull my purse into my lap, he's inches from my window begging with sadder eyes than my dog, just like my dog, in that same eager, tail-wagging way.

The light is still red. Before I open my wallet, I check the locks—they're down—then wonder how much to give. Forget the twenty, but ten maybe? Or just a dollar? Yeah. I open the window the width of a mail slot and pass the bill through, mouthing the words "Take it, take it." He does. The light changes and I hit the gas.

By the time I find a parking space and hustle across to the sidewalk in my new leather

heels—black, shiny, expensive—I’m kicking myself. A dollar? What was I thinking? A ten would get him breakfast *and* lunch if he knows where to go. But a dollar? He’s not exactly a Salvation Army bucket that accumulates over time! I tell myself he probably found my stupidity amusing—but there’d been no smile on his face, no smirk even, just that blurred, momentary eager expression of hope. I decide then that if I see him on the drive home, I’ll make it up to him. I’ll give him the twenty ... I’ll open the window wide enough to tell him to take care.

The day’s mail sits in a basket next to the telephone. John has beaten me home as usual, picked up Petey at day care, and dinner’s bubbling on the stovetop—beef stew again, but how can I complain? He’s Super Dad. I listen to my boys (one four-year-old, one forty) yammering and giggling at whatever game they’re playing with Moose, our boxer, in the room down the hall. I flip through the mail: a few bills, an offer for yet another credit card, and a Save-the-Whales flier. Lots of people feel good about saving whales, but what about saving men who wear signs? I remind myself that I wanted to go to the shelter when we decided to get a dog but John insisted on getting a pure bred—not that I don’t love Moose, and not that people are comparable to dogs, but, well . . . John walks in as I sigh and toss the flier into the pail.

“Donald just called,” he says. “He’s coming tomorrow to install the sound system.”

“Oh good,” I say without much enthusiasm. There’s nothing wrong with the old stereo we’ve been using. It was state-of-the art only five years ago and works perfectly. But we want the latest, smartest system, cutting-edge and expensive, a status symbol for the living room.

“What’s wrong?” John asks. “Bad day at work?”

“Sort of, I guess. I mean, I hope we’re not teaching Petey the wrong values.”

“Values?”

“With all this stuff ....” I gesture to the stainless steel commercial-style range, the Sub Zero fridge—we renovated the kitchen last year—I also point to Moose’s new red bowl, but I realize that’s a stretch.

“Because we’re getting a sound system?”

“It’s going to cost more than several months rent in an apartment around here.”

“And?” John says, giving me a chance to explain myself before he lets loose his burgeoning annoyance.

“Some people in this country don’t even have a place to live.”

He eyes me suspiciously. “That’s true.”

“And isn’t that awful?”

“For them, whoever they are, I’m sure it is. What’s wrong with you?”

“I just feel so spoiled sometimes,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Oh, okay, so you don’t work hard enough for your money? Cause I know I do, and I’m not going to feel guilty when I want to buy something.”

I feel bad then, for putting a damper on his excitement about the new electronics—he’s wanted the thing since they first came out with it. “I’m sorry,” I say, “maybe I’m just hungry.”

“Hungry?” he says. “How dare you, when some people don’t have anything to eat.”

A couple of weeks later, I see him again, the homeless man, but not on the corner of

17 and King. He's fast-walking past the bus depot, looking better, more like a regular person with a destination to get to. There's no sign across his chest this time, though the dirt on his clothing pretty much spells out his situation. I nearly drive into the adjacent lane trying to decide whether the dark splotches on his sleeve are blood or mud.

I'm on my way to the mall. John took Petey to the park and I need to buy some new outfits for work. A few of my blazers have grown holes here and there, and I'm plain sick of the skirts. The mall's lot crowds with the automobiles of people who rose early for the occasion, so I have to park in the boonies and walk through an alley of glistening SUVs, Mercedes, the occasional Hum-V. As I approach, people emerge from tinted doors carrying shopping bags weighted with the day's purchases—bags bulging with *stuff*, most of it no doubt frivolous—and once inside, I can't decide on a store to stop into.

I am suffering some kind of disconnect. Call it empathy, call it disgust. I'm transfixed by the shoppers with their fashionable jeans and cardigans, their shiny boots and pointy-toed heels, the people with their done-up hair and manicured nails and dollar signs twinkling in their eyes. They're steering from one register to the next, sucked into sales like zombies mesmerized by sweaters and slippers, earmuffs, purses, and beauty products. And I want no part of it.

Not when there's a young man not far from the bus depot who wears the same outfit every day, passing through life without a decent coat and hat, wearing some bug-infested sneakers he found or stole or had thrown at him when he ventured into the wrong place. He's the only one I've seen today who could really use an Adirondack sweater and outerwear that protects from the hypothermia caused by exposure to rain and snow. The only one who needs hiking boots of genuine leather with the sheep-fur interior to keep his

feet warm. The sad thing is, if he ever wanted to shop, security would surely stop him at the door.

A prepubescent girl cuts in front of me on her way to a kiosk that sells bath products, and I snarl as she reaches for lip gloss. My stomach is a basket of snakes. It's plain to me something needs to be done, that I must *do* something. A young man out there—a person just like me or my son or my husband, only unluckier—needs a hand and I refuse to stand by with the rest of this world of plenty and watch spoiled children purchase overpriced *lip shiner* when he doesn't have the luxury of dry socks.

I keep an assortment of bills in my wallet, and every morning I approach the stoplight on 17 and King, hoping to find the homeless man standing guard at his corner. But he's never there. An entire autumn passes and I continue to look for him, wondering why he abandoned this place, deciding it's because cheapos like me donated dollar bills or useless things like nickels or nothing at all. I find it hard to sleep, wondering where he spends the waking hours and, worse, where he closes his eyes at night.

It's a blustery day when we finally meet again. Icicles hang from the trees and my tires slide over scatterings of sand and salt. I'm in a lineup of traffic, sipping coffee I bought at Dunkin' Donuts as the car's defrost mechanism whirs. It's slow going as the cars in front of mine lumber over the frosted slope on the approach to the light on 17 and King. That's when I see him standing on the corner, a statue encrusted with freezing rain. I recognize his skinny frame. Car after car pass him by as if they don't see, and he makes no effort to wave his drenched cardboard sign. He's too cold, shaking like a tree with epilepsy.

As I near the light, I reach into the glove compartment and grab a wad of tissues. When I get to the corner, the light turns green, but I stop anyway. I open the window and look straight into the homeless man's blurred face and blue frothing mouth. His body shivers like a tuning fork with limbs that occasionally kick and sputter. I offer him the Kleenex. "Wipe your nose and get in," I say, ignoring the chorus of horns behind me. He stares at the tissues, then grabs them in a jumble of uncontrolled movement and swipes them across his face, removing some of the snot and frozen froth.

"Good enough," I say. "Come on."

The light turns red. The horns cease.

He hesitates the way a foreigner would, unsure of the words I've spoken, worried perhaps that he'll offend me when he reaches for the door. I make sure I've opened the locks. He reaches for the handle, surprised when the door pops open and the car hovers long enough for him to dive inside.

A hammer hits the anvil in my chest, warning against danger, but I tell myself to hold steady. He's dying out there. If I don't do something, he could die in front of all these people peering out of their stupid, cozy cars.

The light changes and I drive, eyeing him in the mirror as he bobs and shivers, his breath a harsh in and out rasp. He uses the tissue to wipe again. I put the heat up another notch, the sound like a plane engine. He closes his eyes as if it hurts to feel the warmth. I drive a couple of blocks, watching him settle into stillness. I can smell him, an earthy-wet overripe mix of street dirt and sweat and who-knows-what.

I pass the office parking lot and head around the block. There's a shelter not far from my building. I work in the sketchy area of the city, on the invisible line that divides the

good side from the bad. To the left, you'll find a U-haul rental, a secondhand furniture store, and an old diner that graduates to newer, cleaner restaurants. Further still, the trendy cafes and lounges emerge, mingling in between jewelry stores and diamond-cut boutiques where people with money window shop to pass the time. To the right, it's not so nice: railroad tracks, an overpass, a topless bar, and at the outskirts of the projects, the shelter. At the next red, I offer him my coffee, turning only partially around, still buckled in by the seat belt. "Here," I say, "you need this more than I do."

He doesn't move at first and just as I start to think he's deaf or mute or maybe both, he speaks. "What do you want?" His voice is as raw as vegetables pulled from the ground, soil still clinging to them.

I gaze at him through the rearview, at his light eyes, swollen around their thawed rims, and his cracked, bloodied lips and chapped complexion. I say, "I don't want anything from you."

He makes the coffee disappear the way a cold soda would on a hot summer day.

"You know there's a shelter around here, don't you?" I'm still looking in the rearview and he's eyeing the road straight ahead.

"So," he says.

"I'm taking you there. You shouldn't be out in weather like this. No one should."

He sneezes, then coughs, the sound like twisting metal. Hearing it makes my own throat hurt. I offer more tissues, but he refuses. "How old are you anyway?" I ask.

His fingers reach for an itch on his sunken cheek and something, a pebble or ice or maybe a scrap of drywall, drops from his hair. "Twenty-two," he says and his face contorts. Something like a grin appears.

“Is that funny?” I ask, but he doesn’t respond.

I want to ask him why he’s out there, what he does every day, where he closes his eyes at night, but it seems rude. “You know, I’ve got some old clothes of my husband’s that might fit you if you want them.”

“What do you want?”

“Nothing,” I tell him. “Honestly, I want nothing from you.” We’ve reached the shelter and I steer the car into a loading zone.

He stares out the window, at the building. It’s nondescript. A stucco rectangle with a door and one dark window. The word *SHELTER* hangs on a pitted metal sign above the transom. I don’t blame him for not getting excited about going in there—the place doesn’t exactly evoke fuzzy feelings of home. “You got any cigarettes?” he asks.

I unlatch my seat belt and turn around, gripping the headrest, facing him full on. “I don’t, sorry.” He might be twenty-two and then again, maybe not. He’s like a boy and a sixty-year-old man at the same time. I reach into my purse, take out a fifty I’ve been holding for him. “Are you going in there?” I gesture out the window.

“There’s no smokes in there.”

“I mean, for shelter. To get out of this. You’re going to get sicker than you already are if you don’t get warm.”

He gazes at me. That elusive, blurred look. Foreign-language misunderstanding and mistrust wrapped up in one.

“Here.” I hold out the money. “Buy some food and cough drops, okay? Cigarettes, maybe, but food—something good and hot. On Monday, I’ll bring you some clothes. My name’s Kate, by the way, what’s yours?”



He grabs the bill like a dog that thinks he's going to miss the biscuit if he doesn't snatch it from my hand. "What do you want?" he says. "You want me to do something? You want me to touch—"

"No," I say, reddening at the suggestion. "I feel bad, that's all. I just want you to take care, okay? Go on now, I have to get to work."

He opens the car door as instructed. The wind blasts inside, snuffing out the layer of heat that warmed me like a blanket. My eyes tear. Before he gets out, he looks like he wants to say something—thanks, or see you later—or maybe that's only a projection on my part. The door swings closed and I watch him bypass the shelter without a second glance. I'm already half an hour late for work.

On Monday, he's at the light on 17 and King again, only he faces the onslaught of cars this time, wide-eyed and no doubt in wait of me. When I stop, he's already stepping to the curb, dropping into the backseat of the car, eager for whatever I have for him.

"How was your weekend?" I ask. He looks better. A little less spindly, much more of this earth. This time I can imagine him cleaned up, sitting at a dinner table. A sandy-haired young man, light shade of stubble over his chin, blue eyes and elusive grin. No snot frozen to his face. His knees bob to some racing internal beat—caffeine or drugs maybe—or maybe he's just charged by the cold morning air. It's barely above freezing.

"Where is it?" He rubs his hands together and coughs the frozen air out of his lungs. "What'd you bring me?"

"Here," I point to the passenger seat beside me. "Grab it."

The paper shopping bag warps and protests as he pulls it over and digs in. First he

throws the wool hat over his pink ears, then he peels back his crusted overcoat so he can pull on a sweater. The boots tumble out of the bag to the floor, like two bricks. They're lumberjack sturdy, I had to guess the size. Some scuffling sounds follow: He's pulling off the bug-infested sneakers and stuffing his feet into the new shoes.

"Shoot, I meant to bring you a pair of socks," I say.

He's not paying attention. He's a lioness who's made a kill and wants to get the meatiest parts before the rest of the pride comes along. The bag crumples and folds as he struggles to unfold John's canvas jacket with the thinsulate liner. John has never worn the thing outside of trying it on at the store because when he got home he decided it made him look bulky. But bulky is good for life on the street, or so I would imagine.

"Better?" I ask.

He's pulling my father's old leather gloves over his dusty-white hands, waiting now for the warmth to spread from outside in. His eyes close and he sinks into the leather interior the way my son Petey does after a vigorous day at the swimming pool.

"So, where do you sleep at night?" I ask.

He opens one eye in my direction, no part of him moves except that one eyelid.

"Why? What do you want?"

"Nothing," I say. "I just imagine it must be hard out there. It's so cold and ... aren't you scared?"

We're passing the entrance to my building's parking lot. The mechanical arm is down, as expected. I'm late again. "Isn't that where you work?" he says.

I can't lie. He's probably seen me there. "Yes."

"Where are you taking me?"

“Where do you want to go?”

“I’m hungry. You got any money?”

“I’ll drop you at the diner, but we have to hurry. I’m late again.”

He’s tying the boot laces when I pull in front of the diner. “You really should go to the shelter, at least to sleep,” I say, leaning over the seatback so I can see the shoes on his feet. Then I pass over a twenty. He keeps his hand out for more. “That’s all today,” I say. “Do the boots fit all right?”

He shoves the money into John’s coat pocket before assaulting my ears and eyes with a violent string of curses and crazed facial expressions. The ferocity of his response pins me to the steering wheel and I peer out the window to see if anyone out there might save me should he become violent. “I’m sorry but I don’t have any more today.”

“Don’t lie,” he says, his eyes growing bigger and rounder than I would have imagined possible. He punches the back of my seat and I’m sure he’s going to come at me next, but instead he reaches for the door handle and fumbles out of the car. The boots make him spastic, they’re too big, and the tail of John’s coat skims the ground behind him.

“Don’t be angry,” I shout and the door comes back at me like a swift jab, the hinges creaking just before the ear-pressurizing smack of impact. The car wobbles side to side and a fissure with angel-hair tributaries zips up the window, the sight of which makes my hair stand on end. *John is going to kill me.*

When I get to my desk, there’s a message on my voicemail. My friend Ginger: “Kate, was that you at the light this morning? Did you pick up that street person? I know it couldn’t have been you, but it looked like your car. Call me.”

I get home that night and John is waiting for me by the door. Earlier I ignored his call to my cell phone, and his crossed arms and the vulture slope to his back let me know he's angry. "I just spoke to Ginny Hampton," he says and he pauses, his forehead wrinkling into zigs and zags of perplexity. "What's this about you picking up strangers on the way to work? And did you give my coat away?"

I vaguely roll my eyes. "You never wear it anyway, John."

"You did? You picked up some guy—"

"He was freezing!" I unwind my scarf, drop it on a chair. "All I did was give him some clothes."

"Why?"

"Because it's the humane thing to do." I turn away from him, peel off my own outerwear. "How's Petey?" I say, but John's not having my change of subject.

"You're really losing it, aren't you? I mean, who the fuck do you think you are, Mrs. America?"

I peer down the hall. Petey's watching cartoons on his iPad. I hear something about Elmer Fudd hunting wabbits. "Because I'm charitable?"

"Because you're taking a risk, letting a nutcase like that into your car. You're a woman for Christ's sake."

"And he's just a kid, like Petey, only a little older and unluckier. And how do you know he's a nutcase?"

John's eyes close, it's the sting of frustration. "What normal people live on the street? What kind of people let their kids grow up on the street?"

“That’s what I want to know,” I say, nodding as if we’re in total agreement.

“Right. So did you find out?”

At that, my conviction topples. “I don’t even know his name,” I say. And then because the homeless guy’s ungrateful door slam hurt my feelings, I tell John how he broke the car window—I don’t want to tell, it feels like tattling somehow, but out it spills, onto the kitchen floor.

John’s face swells like a berry, as expected. “How’d he do that?”

“It’s not like we don’t have the money to fix it ...” My words evaporate as John’s heavy footfalls stomp across the room. He pulls open the door to the garage, then hesitates before going in, his pointer finger stabbing the air in my direction. “Don’t you pick him up again, Kate. Promise me right now you won’t pick him up!”

The next day, I take a different route to work. I can’t bear to drive past my nameless friend as though he’s invisible to me.

The day after that, he’s waiting for me in the company parking lot. He holds a Starbuck’s cup in each hand and leans against my boss’ Lexus, looking like a dreamer who has all the time in the world and no ulterior motive but to sit there and dream. I’m sort of glad to see him and sort of not. In John’s canvas coat and hiking boots, he looks like an ordinary civilian, though the woolen cap I gave him stretches too far over his oblong head and I imagine his eyelashes bang against its rim. I try to smile in his direction, though my husband’s fear has spread fissures through my slab of confidence.

I park and he rushes over. The handle of the back door snaps violently—it’s locked. He fumbles one of the coffees and, when it hits the ground, curses in a language so ugly

I'm not sure it's English.

"Give me a minute," I shout from inside. "I'm just grabbing my bag."

Surveillance cameras perch like birds on poles around the lot. I know this, but I also know that Howie, the guard, would rather check out the women entering the building than view the black-and-white images on television screens. Besides, I doubt this encounter looks like much of a situation. Not with my homeless friend dressed in my husband's hand-me-downs, still relatively clean.

"Where've you been?" he asks, sounding more betrayed than hostile.

"I'm sorry, I had to come in very early yesterday, and this morning I had to pick something up across town so I took a different route."

Not interested in my excuses, he rides over my words with quick nods of the head, then raises the remaining cup of coffee toward me. "For you," he says, his mouth stretching crookedly, hinting at a smile but not quite getting there—his lips are so cracked and dry I imagine even minor undulations hurt. "It was bad, what I did."

We both pause to eye my plastic-covered window. I'm relieved he's not here to fight. I have to remind myself not to let him sucker me too much, though his coy sentiment definitely smoothes over some of those fissures in my confidence. "It's okay," I say coolly. "It can be fixed. You keep the coffee since you dropped one."

His expression goes blank, blurred with confusion. Some thinking is going on behind his cloudy eyes. He pushes the cardboard cup in my direction. "Mine was mostly finished," he says. "This is for you."

That reminds me, I have one last present for him: I pull a balled-up pair of wool socks from my briefcase and place it in his free hand. "These are for you." He doesn't

acknowledge what I've done, doesn't so much as look at the socks, and instead holds fast to the line that connects his eyes to mine. He wants to say something, I can tell. Just as I'm about to tell him I really need to get going, his countenance softens and he says, "Robert. That's my name."

It's as heartfelt as a confession, a gift, I realize. And I'm pleased with our progress—I'm please with him. "All right, Robert. Thank you." I take the coffee and start in the direction of my building.

He shoves the ball of socks into his coat pocket and walks backwards in front of me, his usual, hopped-up-on-the-balls-of-his-feet stride, only backward.

"It's nutty," he says.

At first I think he's talking about our relationship. Then I realize he's talking about the coffee, which tempts me with its hazelnut perfume. There's no indication that the cup's plastic top has been tampered with or that something has passed through its opening. Why would he waste the money I gave him by spiking my coffee with substances he'd rather ingest himself? Still, I have to ask: "You didn't put any vodka or anything in here, did you? Cause you know I have to work, right? I can't be going in all liquored up."

He rubs his nose vigorously, his eyes squinting down into slits as he wrestles with another one of those painful grins. It's the first time I've seen him laugh and he looks eons younger. I can see that he's not actually twenty-two. He's probably still a teenager. He stops short in front of me, forcing me to stop too. "Come on, momma, while it's still hot."

The *momma* thing dips into one of my soft spots. I take a sip. Then another. It tastes

fine. No vodka. “It *is* my favorite, how did you know?” Then I step around him because I’m late. We pass the lot’s mechanical arm, the garbage pail, the black man I’ve seen fishing half-smoked cigarettes from the ashtray at the entrance of my smoke-free building. It’s a ghost town around here—unlike me, my co-workers have arrived early for the company’s annual meeting.

“I took a guess,” Robert says, still stuck on the thrill of buying me a gift, or so I assume.

I wonder how I’ll fade him from my life. I can’t have him following me around like this.

We walk. Him and his blurry blue eyes remain fixed on me, as if waiting for my face to turn green. And then I suppose it does. I’m green, and the rest of the world glazes over like water cascading over a pane of glass. The ground melts and surges into a fuzzy, moving oil slick that my suddenly inept body slips and slides over. The cup of coffee drops from my thickened fingers and I stumble over feet that feel like size-eight cinder blocks. I reach for Robert (if that’s really his name) and attempt to right my blob of a body as a wave of nausea rolls over me, up and down inside of me, splattering to the concrete at last.

With a quick jerk of his arm, he shoves me away. “Gross,” he says, his face bobbing and wavering like a multicolored flag with wild eyes and flashing teeth in front of me.

I’m distracted by the passing cars, which in my altered state sound like jet engines. I watch in horror, covering my ears with my hands and doubling over in fear as they blur past. Robert is a few strides ahead, on the sidewalk that leads to the entrance to my building. “Over here!” he calls to me. I stagger toward him and he thrusts out his foot. I



see it but sadly can't guide myself around. And now I'm sprawled across the sidewalk with my purse and all of its gizzards rolling about like marbles. A bloody knee peers out the tear in my stocking.

Robert grabs the wallet first, shoves it into John's coat pocket, then reaches for my hand. I think he's going to help me up, instead he pulls the diamond and gold band from my wedding finger, his fingernails scraping across skin and knuckles. He also rips the gold locket with the picture of Petey from my neck. His foot rises—it's a monster, the ridges on its plastic bottom like the mountains of a topographical map—and it comes at me in blurred slow motion. The reverberating crush that follows is blurred as well, and the blood that pools in my nostrils feels like hot, throbbing cotton balls.

He's up and running as I struggle to a stand, dizzy as hell and unable to get a grip on the blurring, whirring world, a great, fleshy plum I can't stop from spinning. But I still know what I want: John's jacket bobbing down the road, and the rings, and Petey. My Petey! I'm off, without concern for personal safety—or dignity.

I don't know how far I get, whether it's feet or yards or blocks, before the toe of my foot catches the curb and the rest of me comes in for a crash landing. My sense of time and place escapes me. My knee stings, my palms burn, my face throbs, and I'm laid out on the ground, my breath in and out like a giant ventilator in my head. But somehow I'm comfortable, and lying there is a lot easier than trying to get up. I think I might sleep. It seems like a good idea.

I don't know how long it is before the scuffy, hole-punched shoes (I can see through to a toe), polyester pants, and tail of a tattered black trench stop in front of my nose. I feel myself jiggled and shaken, and with groaning effort, pulled to my feet. My head is a

helium balloon hovering over this man whose face is like shale, cleaved into angles and cheekbones, rich as chocolate, tilting in question as he peers into my elusive eyes.

“What’s this, now?” he says.

I rub my nose. Pain surrounded by a tender patch of bruised fruit. “I’m hurt,” I say, watching the blur of a car pass, fascinated by the way the water underneath spreads apart then closes up after the the tires ride over. The sky is leaking on the sidewalk, on my clothes, into my eyes.

“Ain’t you got nowhere to go?” he says.

The man holds an umbrella. When I squeeze my hair, it dribbles like a sponge down my sleeve. “What do you want?” I ask him.

His voice is steady, words that rise in wisps of vapor from his mouth. “I don’t want nothing but for you to follow me.”

I know I probably shouldn’t, but the world is a fleshy plum and good judgment is lost somewhere in its dizzy juices. We walk. I almost feel okay in a numb, overly drunken way, though there’s a spike jammed into my head and I’m too tired to pull it out. We walk and walk—blurred people pass, blurred cars, blurred building walls—I trip and fall. I get up. I walk and walk. The man finally stops walking and so do I. “You want to go in there?” he asks.

It’s a nondescript building with one window and a door.

“All are welcome here,” he says, standing under the entrance.

The word *SHELTER* hovers above.

I start to laugh but it hurts—my mouth’s thick and swollen, my lips dry, cracked.

“No, not me,” I say, and I want to say more but the words don’t come.

The fissures in the man's face deepen, his eyes sink into sadness. "Oh yes," he says,  
"all are welcome here."

And I step in.

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