

## THE STICK MAN OF 30<sup>TH</sup> STREET

He was beyond thin, gaunt; a stick figure almost, stoically positioned near the 30<sup>th</sup> Street Train Station on an overpass spanning a narrow stretch of the Schuylkill River. There he'd remained over those intervening years through winter's skin-numbing cold, driving spring rains and blistering summer heat.

The man never made a plea for money or food or clothing. He never spoke in fact, not a word, ever. His sole communication was a tattered supplicating Phillies baseball cap strategically plunked at his feet.

Who is he? Karen wondered on that bitter November morning when she first noticed him, a spindly reed buffeted by the intense wind that swept down the Schuylkill. And how did he wind up just standing there like some petrified tree? she thought. Delicate snowflakes swirled around his worn sneakers in frenzied anticipation of the three-inch accumulation that would surround him at day's end.

"It's freezing out; are you warm enough?" she had asked. "Do you need anything; anything at all?" she said as she tugged her own too-thin coat around herself against the frigid blasts. But he just stared at the ground, seemingly oblivious to her offer. His hooded jacket shielded his face from the worst of the wind's assault, but only partially from the short gust that afforded Karen a quick glance; youngish, maybe her age, a three or four-day-old stubble on pale skin, deep set green eyes, a sweep of dark

hair, brown, black? She shrugged at his unresponsiveness that first day and hurried on to her office.

Karen found his steadfastness odd and intriguing, especially to someone in her profession. Despite his Trappist-like silence she persisted in greeting him cheerfully every day. “How are you today?” she’d chirp, one of three or four commuters to even acknowledge his existence. “Beautiful morning isn’t it?” “Going to be a hot one today,” she tried but he offered nothing in response.

And each day as she crossed 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Karen hurriedly rummaged through her over-stocked bag - a tattered Alfred Adler paperback, keys for unknown locks; cosmetics she never used and didn’t need, really; an indeterminate wad of bills. She would dutifully deposit into his imploring hat every last coin left from her “Commuter’s Special” breakfast: Large coffee; sesame bagel with cream cheese, small apple. Karen had left him the remaining half of her bagel once but it remained in almost the exact same spot at day’s end, just shoved a little behind him.

My uneaten left-overs...how demeaning; what was I thinking! Karen chastised herself when she noticed the untouched bag on the way back to her train that evening. “And me a shrink, no less,” she muttered under her breath as she deposited a few repentant bills in the hat. “How pathetic, trying to ingratiate myself to a homeless guy who won’t even acknowledge me,” she muttered to herself. And she smiled at the ironic mutuality of their plight of “invisibility,” he to most of the world and she to him.

Karen continued hastily on to the house in Ardmore she had tight-fistedly budgeted for in the first years of her clinical practice. She shared her small home with an exasperatingly needy but profoundly affectionate Black Lab rescue, a three-legged hamster who made her heart twinge each time he hopped on his exercise wheel, and a cheery bright yellow, but mute, canary with irritable bowel syndrome. The house was their, and Karen's, refuge from a deep-seated insecurity borne since childhood.

Karen's doting father had died from a recurring infection after losing his right arm in a Westmoreland County mining accident when she was only nine. She had idolized him and even now still wedged the toothpaste cap between her teeth while twisting the tube open with her left hand. Her mother had never been more than a few faded, sepia-toned photographs which Karen secreted in the tattered lining of her suitcase after her father's death when she'd been shuttled among numerous foster homes until she "aged out of the system."

But she never aged out of the deep ache for the sense of security. For Karen, having a house of her own somewhat ameliorated that yearning. And that still-extant, gnawing fear of being set adrift accounted in some part for the urgent gravitational pull of the "stick man," as she had come to refer to him.

One morning as Karen bent to the empty but still optimistic hat, she could definitely sense his eyes following her movements. "I think he actually took note of me,"

she commented to a colleague. And some weeks later as she approached his corner, a startlingly loud boom from a nearby construction site seemed to frighten him beyond reason. “Poor guy practically levitated,” Karen mumbled at his excessive reaction. “Only time I’ve seen any real movement from him.”

So Karen decided to take a tentative step over his invisible barrier. “My name is Karen, I’m a psychologist...if you ever decide you want some help, I’d be glad to try to do that for you,” she said, carefully avoiding direct eye contact. “My office is not far from here...on Market Street near 18<sup>th</sup>,” she continued in her warmest, least intrusive voice. Karen briefly flashed her business card before dropping it in the hat.

The stick man vanished on a Tuesday, almost three weeks before that rainy day when multitudes stood in reverential remembrance. It had been a brutal stretch of steel-grey skies and pounding rain. Karen stepped gingerly among the barely navigable rivulets as she neared his spot, her eyes squinting almost shut under her low-riding slicker hood, chin close against her chest. “Huh?...no hat,” she said aloud ...“and no stick man,” as she looked around puzzled to see if he’d changed position. He hadn’t. Well, can’t blame him for calling in sick on a day this awful, she thought.

The following morning Karen skirted the prior downpour’s detritus that had congealed in patches of murky puddles and miniature dams along the curbs. As she approached the corner she saw he was gone again; and the day after that also. “I’m really concerned about the poor soul,” she confessed to a friend.

“Have you seen the homeless man who’s usually on the corner over there?” Karen worriedly asked the traffic cop who occupied his time ambling from corner to corner, screwing up the flow of traffic he was supposed to control. He just shrugged and shook his head. The nearby newsstand guy looked at her like, “Who?”

“Gone; no trace; just faded away,” she grumbled audibly.

The stick man’s descent into the isolation and silence of his mental prison on 30<sup>th</sup> Street had begun years before, not long after he’d met a stunning young woman at a small art gallery on Spring Garden Street. A newly “discovered” artist had recently graduated from the walls of downscale cafés on South Street to an actual showing of his work.

“I think it’s upside down,” he’d whispered to the willowy stranger he’d just trailed across the packed room. Her blurted-out laughter turned a few heads in the overly serious crowd of contemplative, chins-in-palms-of-hands poses and self-congratulatory, knowing head nods. And she smiled warmly when he bragged of his own “Honorable Mention” the time he’d matted and framed the paper palette he wiped his brushes on and entered it in a local contest.

And so they visited other galleries together, went to movies, traveled to the theatre in New York, and had quiet dinners out, and in. Like him, she was a Phillies fanatic so they spent sporadic afternoons attending home games, eagerly slipping into the kind of comfortable relationship that often never ended. He’d visited Bailey Banks &

Biddle on Chestnut Street in late August that year. “Just looking” he’d say as he peered into the cases of rings, a silly grin on his face. “Just hoping,” is what he really meant. As for her, well, he’d never know for sure.

His TV hadn’t been on weeks later on that bright September 11th morning. His phone rang and he heard a voice so panic-stricken he failed to recognize it at first as her brother’s.

“Turn on your TV...hurry!” the phone yelled at him. He stood in front of it stunned at the earlier horrific events being reiterated over and over; horrendous images that froze him, transfixed by the obscenity of what he was seeing...then finally he understood the reason his phone rang, why this particular flight and time resonated with such intensity.

“Tell me it isn’t her flight...Christ! Please tell me she’s still there with you, that she missed it or something,” her brother’s voice moaned from what seemed a thousand miles away.

In the ensuing months he slowly succumbed to the tightening circle of his existence, a gradual, almost imperceptible constriction of his mental, visual and vocal world, his very essence shrinking in the process. Friends expressed concern so he began avoiding them. Phone calls from her brother and other relatives, his and hers, went unreturned. Open tubes of acrylic paint solidified exactly where they’d sat on that September day. Bills went unpaid...until finally there he stood, shocked into near total retreat, tunnel vision focused on the ground at his feet, barely aware of the swirl of the

sounds of life around him...until one consistent, soothing voice had begun to penetrate ever so slightly through the cloud of his pained consciousness.

It would take him many days to complete his pilgrimage to the place his life had been shattered that early clear Tuesday morning. Summoning the internal strength to finally begin this journey had been almost overwhelming. He wandered circuitously westward, forcing himself closer each day until he finally knelt at the fringe of the open field, afraid to venture any nearer.

At first he sobbed quietly, his head bent in desperation, but soon his tears flowed freely, finally giving vent to his long suppressed heart rending grief.

“Please! Go back! Please! Turn back,” he yelled to her, to the air, to the passing of time. His vocal cords were stunned and burned at this sudden break from their long dormancy. There would be many more days of agonizing recuperative rambling until he returned on the exact, rain-swept date to the stark emptiness of the dismal corner that had become his life.

Freezing rain pinged on the roof of Karen’s taxi as it sped from the airport to Center City on her return from the annual American Psychological Association’s convention. Over the past weeks, thoughts of her stick man had become less and less frequent. He wasn’t gone completely, just become dimmer, like the faded photographs from her childhood luggage.

“Where you comin’ in from,” the cabbie asked. “Miami; glad my meeting was there, not Toronto or something *this* year,” she sighed as the cab lurched to a sudden stop across from the train station. “Still, I hated to be flying on this of all days,” she continued.

“Jackass,” the cab driver mumbled at the meandering traffic cop who was crossing Market Street in front of him, against the light. As the cabbie stepped lightly on the gas and began to move forward, Karen’s glance drifted to the left through the strings of cold rain being pushed almost horizontally across the taxi’s window.

“STOP! Wait; Stop here!” she hollered. Brakes screeched and horns blared behind the cab as Karen grabbed a handful of cash from the cacophony of her purse and pushed it to the driver. She stumbled out of the taxi and literally sprinted across the slick roadway to his corner.

“You’re back...I’ve been so worried...are you okay?” she asked with a deep sincerity that made the stick man glance up at her briefly.

He shrugged and shook his head ever so slightly.

My God, he actually reacted, she thought excitedly.

“Where have you been?” she asked, fully aware she was pushing her luck.

“Trip,” was all he said, quickly retreating into himself and adding nothing more.

“Wow! He spoke, he actually spoke,” she repeated to herself as she walked in an ecstatic daze to her office, barely aware of the sleety rain.



The next morning she eagerly approached his corner, but her excitement quickly dissipated as she realized he was gone once again.

“Maybe I pushed him too far, too much at once,” Karen wondered aloud as she guiltily trudged on to her building. Well, he came back yesterday, maybe he’ll be back again tomorrow, she thought, or maybe...and there he stood, her stick man, at the entrance to her building, her tattered business card in his hand.

“Come, come inside please,” Karen said, gently ushering the most interesting patient she’d ever had up the elevator to her office. She stopped briefly at her assistant’s desk. “Don’t move; stay right there; I know you’re good at that,” Karen smiled warmly. The stick man looked directly up at her, in surprise as she hastily scratched a barely legible note to cancel all her morning sessions and not disturb her.

Finally, finally, finally, Karen thought as she plunked herself down across from her stick man and inhaled deeply in preparation for...she knew not what.

“Well, where to start, where should we begin. Maybe...,” Karen hesitated and tensed warily as the stick man reached into his right coat pocket. And she watched, not quite able to suppress a smile, as he leaned forward and slid half a bagel across the small table that sat between them.

-End-