

A Confession

Anonymous, Peabody College

Dearest Reader,

I, like many Americans, have never experienced homelessness. Frankly, I never quite understood it either. From my vantage point, there were simply those that tried hard enough and those that didn't. Perhaps the occasional person or family was struck by bad luck, but in these times, who didn't have "bad luck"? As far as I was concerned, these cases were a dime a dozen.

Even when I began serving at God's Extended Hand, the oldest homeless shelter in San Diego, I simply didn't get it. For hours every Sunday, I would watch as dozens of able-bodied men and women shuffled past me, grabbing trays of food and then plopping down on rickety plastic chairs, chowing down like mindless drones. I couldn't help but think that if they can receive food, they logically should be able to hand out food. Why didn't they just get a job at McDonald's or something? They would be making money. Hell, maybe they could even afford that car or that house they always whispered about. All they had to do was try hard enough. In front of me, I just saw freeloaders in the land of the free. Week after week there seemed to be no progression, but voicing my opinions would've been foolish, so I let them stew.

Until one day when I was struck across the face over an extra slice of bread. I lost all composure, the waterworks let loose, and I voiced my frustration to Harry, the cook. Upon hearing my rant, Harry simply put his hand on my shoulder, turned me around, and pointed to the tables.

"Go ask." Two words. Less than five seconds. Turned my world upside down.

Slowly I approached the previously belligerent gentleman. Cautiously, as if treading IED-riddled ground, I pulled up a seat next to him. Deafening silence. Nothing but the squishy crunching sound of packaged salad being devoured. No words. No pleasantries. No nothing. I sat there, awkwardly, for five minutes before working up the courage to ask the question: "What's your story?" It took a moment, but then the man spoke.

Since then, the stories I've heard haunt me. Terrifying tales built upon the most brutal truth. Honest to God, I wouldn't dare think I fully understand the hells and demons these people have sealed away in the past or are suffering from now. The following three stories are written with the permission of the individuals. A slice of *their* lives and *their* struggles.

Simply Another Number

The streams of people on this bustling street of downtown San Diego pass this weathered old man on the regular. Some give the occasional side glance of disgust, others drop their nickels and pennies to Wayne Johnson and then go on with their lives. Everyone thinks they know why the old man sits there, week after week, but none know how he got there.

Well, here's how:

Because years ago, on a sweltering summer day at the recruitment center in San Diego, CA, he decided to serve his country.

Because he fell in love with the ideals of freedom and service and camaraderie.

Because he was a hurt little boy that only wanted to matter, to be noticed, to excel.

Because he went back, tour after tour, moving from war zone to war zone, each time rising up the ranks and each time losing a piece of himself to the oh-so-glorious smack (heroin).

Because after retirement, adjustment to the civilian life of a white picket fence and bright green lawn wasn't possible.

Because, in the end, he was "simply another number" to those at the VA.

Because eventually, the needle became the only way to make the pain, the unbearable darkness, the constant state of paranoia go away.

Because eventually the man became more needle than himself, and he noticed that what was left of his shoddy body was about to be lost.

And so, he decided to give up his wealth to become sober, to be unable to afford his bliss, to hold onto his body. The people passing see a somber old man with gray eyes and a gray beard who tells each of them, "God bless."

They don't know the rest of Wayne Johnson's story, or the scars of war, scars from protecting *their* lives, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

The Secular Man of God

Matthew has had a rough life.

A mother dead at childbirth. A childhood in foster care. A father long gone, like memories of his last name, or his own birthday.

He bounced from home to home, slept on park benches more often than he cares to admit, and found himself on the street like many of the neglected youth today.

He's tried his hand at magic and had his hand broken along with fingers, nose, cheekbones, collarbones, feet, and ribs in his struggle to survive under foster parents.

But he's always been able to persevere. More than anything, he wants to believe in something. Ask him why, and he'll say, candidly, "I'll finally have some control."

Tonight, in front of the God's Extended Hand community, he delivered his first testimony. It began with barely audible murmurs and stammers, but later filled the room with roaring, confidence-filled, carefully selected words that bounced off the faded walls.

It lasted five minutes.

Now he's in the corner, head down, by himself.

He's whispering "What am I doing here? Can God be real? If he is, why hasn't he helped me?"

It lasted fifteen minutes.

Matthew asks for this to be included: "To my foster parents: don't neglect your children. I wish we could've coexisted. Like I do as a secular man of God."

Un Día, Un Día, Un Día

Inside the room, the woman struggles to stay awake cutting newspapers. Lying next to her are her two little boys.

She pays no attention to the clock that is far past 12 or to the cold concrete around her.

Her name is Maria Pérez, a mother of two, a dreamer, an immigrant, who strives to provide for her family and chooses not to remember that son of a bitch who took everything from her.

When she was a little girl, she came across the border. Expecting to see her cousins on the other side, she instead found a group of strange men. They stuffed her in the trunk and gagged her before she could scream.

Back in Mexico, her family never knew what she was about to endure. The hours, days, weeks, years spent as a toy for the wealthy. Chained in the land of the free. A perverse and twisted fate if there ever was one.

But Maria, well, she believes she has to grow from her past. She's a survivor of everything imaginable. What can the world throw at her that she won't be able to pull through?

Maybe, unlike so many people, she has found the strength to move on, perhaps in the cold concrete box, but hopeful for her future.

Maria clocks out.

Outside, snuggling her two boys, she repeats like a lullaby: “*un día, un día, un día*”

The lives of Wayne, Matthew, and Maria are only a fraction of the stories I’ve heard while working at God’s Extended Hand. For me, they serve as a reminder of my blind misjudgment and push me to help in any way I can. For the dear reader, they present a choice: to live unaware as the many that label the homeless community as those that just don’t work hard enough, or to seek out the stories of those around you. If the reader chooses the latter, I invite them to add the stories they find. It’s time we shatter the stigma that surrounds this community of individuals that desperately needs our help.

Yours Truly,
Anonymous