

Nowhere Was Home

The Street Kids and Their Truth

By Tim Wees

1993: A story of the streets of Canada from Montreal to Vancouver .. with a little bit of New Orleans thrown in. The story is told by the young people who have lived the streets, and comes from a request from these people that their story be told. "Nobody will listen," was the common lament. Here is your chance to listen.

Table of Contents

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Foreword

I live on a beautiful island among a group of islands in the Georgia Strait on Canada's west coast, between Vancouver Island and the mainland. There are forests, beaches and a tranquil life style that all who live here cherish.

In the summer, young homeless people, ranging from their early teens to early twenties, are coming to the islands for a summer holiday. On the island I where live, there are about 15-20 such young people, and, on my neighbouring isle, estimates range from 50 to 100.

This group is neither cottagers nor tourists who contribute financially to the islands. They are not so affectionately referred to as 'The Shrubbies.' They are street kids that come from a circuit of cities that include Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal.

On a summer's evening last year, I spent an hour listening and talking with one young 'shrubbie,' a girl of about sixteen. We sat in the dark next to the island community hall. She told me what life is like for her in the winter in Vancouver.

Her winter home is a 'squat.' A squat is a box or a sheltered stoop or anything that will provide some measure of protection from the elements. Her only possession, beyond the ratty clothes she wore, was her guitar. Her daily work was to play her guitar on the street and in the Vancouver subways and sing songs about love and freedom to passers-by, in the hopes of stirring some smiles in the tired and worn faces of her city audience. Maybe some change would be thrown into her guitar case.

They all have their stories of personal situations, and they weave a tale of a growing number of street children who have formed into a sophisticated culture of their own. In a very real way this culture has been disenfranchised, as are the individuals, from the rest of society.

Many of these young people come to the islands for a summer holiday from city life, a rejuvenation before they go back to the city for the winter. Some come, looking for a way out of their own personal dilemma, to experience a personal healing, looking for opportunity.

Whatever their personal reasons for coming here, these young people are often isolated from these communities, a rural repetition of their city experience.

On one island, matters are becoming urgent, with the danger of violence now being present. Food-related break-ins are frequently reported.

These young people have campsites up on a mountain in wooded areas. They have cooking fires that, should they catch in the surrounding brush, could cause an island-wide forest fire. They also camp on or near the beaches, hang out in the business area, and are a source of distress to both tourists, who come to the island in the summer, and island residents, who earn their year-round living from these same tourists.

Some of these new arrivals to the islands have established lasting relationships with the community and have stayed as part of the permanent population. Most leave before the winter weather starts.

Some islanders are hostile to these newcomers and others are more compassionate.

Who are these young people?

The interviews in this book are an attempt to find out.

It has not been difficult to find young people to interview, and they have been only too happy to share their truth. The interviews were taped, transcribed and then edited to provide a truthful presentation to you the reader. The edited interviews have been read by the people interviewed and further edited where necessary. Pen names have been used to protect everyone concerned.

The material in these stories does not come from life on the islands. It comes from the streets and includes experiences that put people on the streets. It will be of interest both to rural people, confronted with what one would have thought was a city problem, and city people watching their society disintegrate. For all of us it represents an opportunity for some sober thinking.

There is no attempt made here to lay blame at anyone's doorstep for the situation in which our street children live, or have lived. This is a social condition in many communities across the country, and, for that matter, throughout the world.

There are no answers here, only insights to be gained from listening to the truth spoken clearly.

Table of Contents

Nowhere Was Home

Foreword

Chapter 1 Monique - For the Sake of Experience

Chapter 2 Samantha - No Backing Down

Chapter 3 Kevin Graves - It's a Tunnel

Chapter 4 Sherry - "It's So Sad"

Chapter 5 Sherry & Kevin - Friends

Chapter 6 Zack - Misery and Mourning

Chapter 7 Raven - Pure Heroin Kills

Chapter 8 Peter - Trying to Make Adult Decisions

Chapter 9 Dean - Jumping in Puddles Works

Chapter 10 Clover - Listening to My Inner Voice

Chapter 11 Nap - Scary

Chapter 12 Psycho - Being Strong

Chapter 13 Sonia - No More Abuse

Chapter 14 Mike - Hooked

Chapter 15 Mary - Locked In

Chapter 16 Carve - Brutality as the Child of Violence

Chapter 17 John - Turning Anger Inward

Chapter 18 Francine - Part-Time Street Girl

Afterword

Chapter One

Monique

“For the Sake of Experience”

Sitting in a house overlooking Baynes Sound and the mountains on a cloudy day.

When did this experience start for you?

When I was fourteen and my parents kicked me out of home. I certainly didn't want to. I wanted to hurry through high school so I could get to university and study philosophy and psychology. I wanted to live the good life. I came from an upper class home.

From the time I was eleven years old, I became very very depressed. And rebellious. I had extremely overprotective parents who were really messed up in a lot of ways. That messed me up, and then with rebelling against it, it just became a horrible and very tense house. Worse than that, was the fear of the violence. The tension was so thick, you could cut it with a knife.

My sister and my parents have always blamed me for being the sole cause of what happened in the family. So my mother thought she would resolve it by kicking me out of the house. Once she had done that, my dad agreed. He disowned me and said that I was never allowed to come back.

I was fourteen years old, and I loved school. I did well in school. Then I had to leave because I couldn't legally get a job until I was sixteen.

I had to work under the table as a live-in nanny for one of my acquaintances, just so I could have a place to live. After a while she kicked me out, and I had no place left to go. I did the round of friends. At that age, all my friends still lived with their parents. I used them all up. I would stay a few months at one place and a week at another, and after I had gone through ten friends, there was no place to stay. I ended up sleeping on the sand on the beach for a month and a half. Luckily, it was the summer.

It was a really horrible situation while I was living at the first place, after my parents kicked me out. My landlady and roomy was a single eighteen year old mother with a two and a half year old who was extremely hyper and mentally stunted. She couldn't handle it. She was an alcoholic. She had been through really horrible emotional experiences; sexual assault and rape. She had lived on the streets herself. She abused and neglected her child. She kept having men over who abused her.

I spent most of the six and a half months there living on the streets, although I was technically living at her place. She would come home drunk at eleven or twelve at night and kick me out of the house so she could have privacy with her male friends and acquaintances. This was mainly in the winter. I spent most of the night in the winter just walking around downtown from midnight until four or five in the morning. I wasn't allowed to hang out in the apartments, so I hung out in the donut shops.

It was a one bedroom apartment. The child had the bedroom. The waterbed was in the kitchen, and I slept on the floor.

I was really interested (and a good thing too because I spent all my time there) in the seamier side of the night life; all the poor people, alcoholics and the night owls. It can be

likened to the images Tom Waits presents in Nighthawks at The Diner.

I spent most of my nights in the donut shops and just walking around in the downtown area.

What did you see in the people?

Hopelessness. Trying to find a place for themselves in the donut shops. It's funny finding romantic poetry in late night donut shops, but there is. People go there because they are lonely, and they want a place to warm their bones, and they know that other people will be doing the same thing.

Generally, you don't talk. There is a respect there. You walk in and if you are one of those people, you recognize each other, and you know your boundaries. You acknowledge their presence and let them do their own thing. Everyone sits in their own misery watching everyone else's misery. There was an invisible bond.

Misery is the bond?

Yes.

Tell me about the misery.

The feeling that no-one will help you. Feeling you don't have a place except in the chain of donut shops. You can always find them, no matter what city you are in. In North America, I can always pick out the place where those people are, where it's okay to go and sit for three hours with one cup of coffee and stare at the wall.

Misery is being cold. The desperation of always trying to find some place warm where you don't have to pay more than the twenty cents you picked up off the side walk. I was that low on money. I used to spend my day walking around

downtown, scouring the side of the road where people accidentally dropped change.

I never panhandled. I don't believe in that. It's against my principles.

Why?

I don't think that anyone owes me anything. Also I think it is pretty well impossible to starve in North America. I have gone days without any food at all and spent one whole summer eating nothing but one blueberry frozen yogurt a day, because that's all I could afford. But you don't starve. People say they are starving, and usually it means they are living on Kraft dinner. Well to me that's not starving. You've still got something. Also I've worked whenever I could. A lot of people panhandling just don't want to work. They say, "Oh I can't find a job," because they're not willing to work in shitty jobs. I don't think that's right. I don't panhandle. I never have.

Can you tell me more about why you don't talk to each other?

It's respect. The only thing you have left when you are living on the streets, or when you are in that kind of miserable situation, is pride. At least it is to me. I can't speak for everyone. You don't want to tell people how low you are.

One thing you learn when you are on the streets is that you don't trust anyone. You don't want to let them know you are vulnerable, especially if you are a fourteen year old girl out at three o'clock in the morning in a bad section of town and alone.

You don't tell people, "Oh, I am living all alone and I'm living on the streets." Then all kinds of things can happen. They can try to pressure you to come back to their place, "You can't stay out here. I have an extra couch." No female in her

right mind would do that. Or they could follow you when you left the donut shop, knowing you have no place to go, and attack you. It's extremely dangerous, and you don't want to tell strangers that you are in a vulnerable position.

You had a circle of friends from your upper class milieu that went to the street? How many?

All of my friends, who would wind up living on the street, did so approximately two years after me. I was the first of my circle of friends to get booted out of her home. The rest were about sixteen when they started living on the streets, and by that time I was already off.

At one point I knew about five of them. Two on the street at a time. A lot were living on the beach where I was. Once I found, when I was on the beach, that there was another person from my circle. He was at the other end of the beach. I tried to find him one night when I was really frightened. But I couldn't find him.

It wasn't like I had a support group on the street.

Were there good times on the street?

Well, I had a sense of freedom for the first time in my life. This was extremely important to me because I am very independent. The other option open to me, when I got kicked out of my home, was to go to the children's aid and live in a foster or a group home. That was not an option as far as I was concerned emotionally. After the smothering, over protection and rules of my parents in every aspect of my life, even my emotions, the freedom was great. But that is the only positive thing I can say about the streets.

I believe that every experience, good or bad, has some worth as an experience. It's character building, and you gain a better understanding of different groups of people.

Is it freedom from something or freedom to be something?

Both. When you get that low, people will tend to excuse almost anything you will do. They say, "Oh she's just a scummy, crazy person."

You walk down the street in Toronto, and some middle aged woman with wild, silky hair and silky face and torn clothes, carrying a plastic bag, comes up to you. She starts spouting about Satan, and is totally crazy, and starts waving her arms at you and chases you down the street. You're not going to get them arrested. You're not going to go to someone and complain. You're just going to know that type. "I'll leave her alone. Poor person," you'll say. And you'll just walk away.

It gave me freedom to be totally socially unacceptable. And no-one would do anything.

But also freedom from my parents. That was the most important thing.

And what did they represent, that you wanted freedom from that?

Freedom from my parents' unhappy marriage. Unhappy is an understatement. Freedom from my mother's religious ideas which she pressed me with. Homophobia, racism, sexism. You name it. They were the most politically incorrect people you'll ever meet.

Freedom from rules, very important to young teens. I had to be home by six o'clock every night or my mom phoned all my friends' places and said "Where is Monique?" At one point my mother added it all up and said, "You're grounded until you're twenty with all the groundings I've given you."

I wasn't allowed to go to the movies. I had to wear certain clothes. I was never given an allowance, so I couldn't even

go down to the store at lunch with the other kids and buy a croissant or fish and chips or a chocolate bar at the convenience store and hang out at my lunch break at school. I was just totally under my mother's rules, and wing, because she was afraid of things happening to me.

I wasn't allowed to play with certain kids. There was a kid on my block who I am still in touch with, a wonderful person. I was not allowed to play with her, and she was not allowed in my house, because my mom said she stole, because her father was black.

There were other kids I was not allowed to play with because my mom heard them swearing as they walked down the street. Or the girl wore tight jeans. My mother really controlled every aspect of my life. I was really curious. Even things that I didn't know if they were right or not, I really wanted to experience them so that I could make up my own mind. By the time I was fourteen, I was beginning to assume that everything my parents told me was lies, so many things had been. So I just wanted to go out and experience what most people would call the seedier side of life. But I had to be in by six o'clock every night.

Nowadays you might say, "Well, compared with living on the streets I would have put up with the rules." But I didn't expect to be kicked out of the house and never allowed back. But once it was done, it was done, and I really relished the freedom.

I have always felt that even a bad experience has some value. It was very exciting being on the streets. It was terrifying and it was dangerous. And it was all new experience.

I used to sit long hours and talk to all the winos. They'd tell me their life stories.

Life on the street gave me a new perspective on people I had been like just a few short months before; people like my family and the kids and families I had grown up with ... just how unwilling they are to become involved and lend a hand in anything that they are afraid will happen to them. I would sit on the street and watch all the people going by who were exactly like my family, and like I used to be, up until a couple of years before. I would think on that and how hard they were trying to keep their blinders on. What an effort it took for them. I never realized that before. How much work went into maintaining their illusion that nothing was wrong.

It was a very enlightening experience. I can't do it again. I could never ever live on the streets again because I know a lot more now, and it's too dangerous. Back then .. some nights I wouldn't sleep all night because I was so terrified. But other nights because of youth and the feeling of immortality that comes with it, it would just be exciting and interesting. But now there is no way I could spend even one night on the streets because I know what could happen, and that it's very likely to happen.

I kind of miss that stupid courage. It was ridiculous. But I'd like to have that feeling. I was really tough back then because I realized I could be tough. I was accosted day and night by slimy men. They would come on to me "Oh, let me buy you a drink." I had to be very very tough to protect myself from that. I miss that toughness. It was a real shield that I had. I felt very strong when I was on the streets. I miss that.

You learned a lot.

I learned a lot from every aspect of life. That's why we live, right. It's to learn.

So something began to turn for you, and you moved off the street.

No, it was more a stroke of luck, because I didn't want to be on the street. I had a full time job. I was working at a yuppie gourmet hot dog restaurant in the Beaches in Toronto. One customer was a very very straight, square woman, whom I had never talked to. She just came in and got her wiener and sauerkraut and left every day. She worked across the street. One day she came in and heard one of the guys talking to me,

"Oh are you going down to sleep on the beach again tonight?"

"Well yea, my paycheck isn't enough for an apartment."

This woman heard me and she was just horrified. She said, "I have a bachelor up at Eglinton and Young and it's really tiny but come share with me, and the rent will be \$100/month." She was a Catholic. At that point I was going around telling people I was a Satanist. I had so much anger and hatred in me. I was raised in the United Church, and it really offended me. So instead of just saying that I was not a Christian, I went the other way, just to piss people off and make myself feel stronger.

She was a REAL Catholic. We had crucifixes in the bathroom, on the closet, over her bed, in the kitchen; little excerpts from the bible, framed in pink frames in the living room.

I treated her really badly. She was an extremely generous person. I felt really badly a few years ago, and I wrote her a post card apologizing, and she sent a letter back saying, "Oh, that's okay. I'm living in a mobile home in the suburbs now. I got married to an army officer."

That's how I got off the streets. Through the generosity of a stranger. I lived with her for many months.

Were you desperate to get off the streets?

Yea. I kept asking my boss, if I could come and spend the night at his house because I was too afraid to go down to the beach again, and he said, "No, I don't think that's a good idea."

Earlier on, you said you were picking up pennies off the street because you had no money, and then you said you had a full time job.

I spent it. I don't know what I spent it on. Because that was the summer I was just eating frozen yogurt and donuts because I didn't have enough money for anything else. And I don't know what I spent it on. Must have been booze.

You drank?

Yea. It must have been booze. A helluva lot.

Tell me about that. What was drinking for you?

Turning off my mind. So I didn't have to think and didn't have to feel. I've always been one to stew over and over about things that happened. Just making that cycle stop.

I drank a helluva lot. One of my friends said I was an alcoholic for a short period of a few months. I would take airplane bottles of liquor with me places and drink them on the subway. If I was going to wherever, downtown, I would always be sipping booze.

I was working under the table for a real estate agent, keeping the books for him. He used to pay me every Friday night with a mickey of rye, a gram of hash and, if I wanted any acid, it was mine.

Going to the Rocky Horror Picture Show was a main part of my life back then for several years. I went there every single Friday night. Some Saturday nights I'd go to Rochester, New York and do it there. I'd drink my mickey on the way there

and have some left when I got there, and then I'd drop acid. After the show, the whole cast would go to a pub and we'd drink draft beer. I passed out a few times. It was horrible. But that's what I wanted, and that's what I did all the time, just drink drink drink drink.

I was being served booze because I had funny hair and wore tons and tons of make-up. I looked like a hooker basically. That's what I did. Stopped thinking.

After a while I realized, "Hey, this has been going on too long. This isn't just a binge. This isn't partying. This is something else." One of my friends said to me, "Monique, you're drinking way too much too often. It's going on too long. You're an alcoholic."

And I said, "Whoa, I don't want to be one of those people. Alcoholics are losers." So I just stopped. I was able to do that.

I was drinking mainly when I was fourteen and fifteen, and when I was sixteen or seventeen, I dried out and got the apartment and another job.

I loved movies at that point so I applied to a movie theatre and got the job. After I worked there, I moved in with a girl from the Rocky Horror picture show.

That was my circle of friends then. All people I met from the Rocky Horror picture show. I didn't hang out with anyone else. None of my old friends from the neighbourhood. It was a real tight family.

I lived with that girl in the apartment for a year and a half. I was sixteen and seventeen, and she was seventeen and eighteen. We were missing four windows in the apartment. It was on Dundas between Church and Jarvis, with a whorehouse across the street with winos sleeping in our front door when we would come out in the morning. We had

a punk rock store under us and were surrounded by parking lots. The only other building on the street was a roller rink.

There were only two apartments, and they were above a row of stores. We had one and her alcoholic mother had the other. It was pretty wild. At that age we were totally into drugs. She was a witch. I was really into eastern mysticism. We had parties. That was fun. That was probably the best part of my teenage years.

How old are you now?

I am twenty-one.

It's not that far behind you then.

It seems very far behind because I've changed so much. My life style has changed. I have goals now. My goals back then I felt I had to give up. So I would just pine away. I didn't have any goals because I didn't expect to get them.

Almost everything about me has changed. I don't party any more. I'm totally anti-social. I don't enjoy being with people. I will not go to a party or a gathering of more than seven people. I don't even do drugs any more. I can't drink more than half a glass of alcohol before getting an instant headache.

Are you happy?

Yes. Very happy.

And the future looks promising?

Yes. I'm opening a book store with my business partner. We're partners in this venture so it's OUR book store. It's opening less than a month from today. I'm very busy getting it all ready.

I've had two dreams ever since I was a little kid. I was going to be a writer or I was going to have a book store. I gave up on being a writer a few years ago, and I'm content with the book store. It will be the best book store you ever saw.

I am extremely excited about that and happy. My business partner, like me, has a vision and a passion for books, and it's not just a business. It's wanting to manifest our dream. Not so much like making money. Wanting all our favourite books in one place where we can say to other people, "Read this. It will help you. It will make you glad."

Anything else you want to say?

I think there should be more help for the kids on the streets. I don't think people have any idea of how many kids there are living on the streets, how dangerous it is, and the fact that almost all of them are escaping abusive families. Foster homes and group homes just are not the answer with their strict rules. Putting you in with a bunch more depressed and abused kids. It's so depressing.

I think that the government should give a whole lot more money to .. basically a group home but with more privacy and more care instead of rules and making it more accessible. I did go to children's aid and they said, "Well, if we put you in a group home, you won't be allowed to leave until you're eighteen." So people don't go in there.

They should listen to the kids and see what they want.

And keep the Catholics out. I went to one group and in the first five minutes I was there they said, "How do you feel about your father." I said, "Well, he doesn't talk. He's a real hermit and we've never communicated and he's really grumpy." And he sat there stroking his beard and said, "Well, you have a classic state of an Oedipus Complex."

And then I also found out that this was a place that was Catholic run. They're very helpful for people who are on the street, but if there is a thirteen year old girl who is pregnant, it's another matter. They are totally against birth control and abortion. They will not dispense condoms or help the kids who come to them get birth control pills. These are people who said to me when I walked in, that 80% of the kids here every night are hookers, baby prostitutes. And they won't give them contraception!

A lot of the organizations that help street kids are Catholic or Christian run and they get their morals mixed up.

I think there should be something that has a youth committee telling you exactly what they need. Not adults. Those adults don't live on the street. They just don't know what's going down.

You have got to raise awareness.

The kids need more respect. I was in a group home for a week or two. You're treated as a problem that has to be watched every minute so you don't run away. Kids need to be treated as people. Let's face it, street kids have had a lot more life experience living on the streets, even for a few weeks, than other kids. You can't treat a fourteen year old street kid like your average fourteen year old.

I tried to talk to my friends who stayed in school, and I felt like I was talking to children.

If someone is out there being a prostitute for six months using all different drugs, they're not going to want to stay there.

Street kids need a place to stay while getting a job. There needs to be free counseling .. as much as you want and not just once a week, like I was given. Half an hour, once a

week, "Okay time's running out. What do you want to talk about today. Watch the time."

There needs to be more money for student welfare. What I really wanted was a crummy little apartment of my own. I didn't care how crappy it was or how small, but I wanted some privacy and responsibility. Student welfare just does not pay enough for a young person to leave home and pay for an apartment and food and go to school. It's pointless. I don't know why they offer it at all, if it's not enough to do it with.

The best thing for a lot of street kids is to have some responsibility, their own place. A place to feel safe. A place to call home. They can feel good. People I've met on student welfare become much more responsible. You can't just goof off all the time. You won't have your apartment anymore. I think student welfare is a wonderful idea, but it needs more money.

When I was living in the apartment with my friend and landlady, I needed to pay rent under the table. She was on student welfare. Just in order for her to finish school. Which she did. They were giving her \$480 a month and the apartment was \$650. Windows were missing. The building was condemned. It's gone now. We had to move out so they could tear it down. It was a horrible place. In the worst section of town. For Toronto, that's a cheap price for an apartment. They don't give you enough to live on.

It's pointless.

- end Chapter One -

Table of Contents

Chapter Two

Samantha

“No Backing Down”

In the community hall.

I moved out of the house, broke up with my boyfriend, and quit school, all in the same week. I was fifteen turning sixteen.

At first I had a house to live in. It was like a flophouse, with a broken toilet. There were probably fifteen of us there. From there I went to California. When I got back from California, I had double pneumonia. I stayed at my parents' house for a month. Then my step-dad and I had a big fight, and I left and never went back.

The disputes were always in regard to my social activities and how I liked to do things. We just didn't see well eye to eye. Never did. We still don't. My mom and I have hashed things out, but my step-dad and I still don't talk. Well, we talk, and we're polite to each other, and that's about it, for mom's sake. Mom was the one who suffered the most through all the fighting.

What were the issues?

Marijuana was a big issue. He had a stash that I used to take from him and go and smoke with my friends, who were all older than me. That was another issue. They were long haired hippie boys in their twenties and I was fourteen and fifteen hanging out with these guys. My parents didn't like that.

Invasion of privacy was an issue. I used to keep a journal. My mom found out about it, and she would read it. Piss me off to no end. Total invasion of privacy.

To look back on it now, it was typical teenage rebellion. The teenager wants her freedom. She wants to go out and learn things and the parents are being protective. They were saying, "You have to come in, and we have to have a curfew for you."

Mom once said that in a male/female relationship, it's usually the female who will back down first and apologize. She is willing to put things aside and carry on new. She said that I never forgave anybody and that I never backed down to anybody, male, female or not. I held my ground all the time and I wasn't going to budge for anybody.

She also said that that was my saving grace the whole time I was on the street. She knew that it didn't matter what anyone else was doing. It always mattered about what I wanted to do.

What city was this?

Vancouver. I left my parent's place in Tsawwassen and went to Burnaby and stayed with this friend of mine that was going to school. His parents were footing the bill for the rent. He was living by himself. I had all my stuff there. I had a back pack, and I would sleep other places. I carried a change of clothes and all the amenities for an overnight stay somewhere. I would just go and stay here and there. Whatever worked out best.

I stayed with a woman who worked with street kids. A lot of kids went to see her. She was not a religious group. She has no kick. She was just trying to create food and shelter and a safe haven, without any obligations or anything being crammed down your throat religiously.

How old were you at this time?

Sixteen.

How did you live on the streets?

How did I live? Ha ha. People always used to ask me where I got my money from and I'd say, "I don't know." I'd just acquire it somehow.

I used to read tarot cards on the streets and in the cafes. That was always good for a meal or two. I used to busk with some friends. That would bring in some money.

When I was on the street, I never panned for money. I could never ask people for money. I could never ask for a place to stay. I look at it as the invasion of privacy that I had, to go and stay at somebody else's place.

Most of my diet was coffee. So long as I had a dollar, it meant that I could sit down and have multiple refills in some cafe. Some places I would sit for as long as I wanted. A lot of places were kicking the street kids out. A dollar was three to four hours' worth of entertainment. I did a lot of sketching. I hung out by myself so much. I didn't really have a group of people that I would hang out with.

When you are on the streets, nobody asked you how you got there. Nobody asks any questions as to where you came from or anything. Whenever mother or father are mentioned, it's usually in really derogatory terms, very bitter feelings. You're untouchable when you're down there. Authority figures were obsolete. They didn't matter if they weren't there.

My mother said to me that she wasn't going to give me any money for rent because "You should have had a job by now." I would say, "Well I don't have a job. Would you hire me if I came over and said, 'I need work. I'm a street kid. I

don't have anywhere to live. I can't even guarantee that I will be at work on time.' People don't hire sixteen year old girls in that situation."

I would never go home with anybody on the basis that they were going to help me out. People would say, "Oh, come on with me. I'll buy you dinner." "No, no. It's okay. I can take care of myself." I never never let anybody fork over anything for me, ever.

I remember busking in the Orpheum at about three o'clock in the morning. A guy came out of a club about half a block away. He had a hole in his head, covered in blood. He was a young middle class man. He was sitting there in his drunken stupor telling me about how the bouncers in the club beat him up. He said he had a wife and kids at home.

The violence and the negativity got to me the most. The total hopelessness of the situation. It's so much easier to get into it than it is to get out of it. It's such a struggle. It's a totally different mind set. It's a totally different perception of reality. Sitting down and eating a meal will have made your day. Having a full plate of hot food. Having a place to stay where you feel comfortable, be it with a good friend. There are so many shaky places that you stay. You're sleeping with one eye open all the time.

Being a sixteen year old girl on the streets, you develop a self protection awareness that you never lose. Three o'clock in the morning in east Vancouver, and I'm totally by myself. Nobody knows where I am. The only protection I had was a little lock blade that I carried with me all the time.

I got sick of it all. I would walk by a sleazy strip bar when it was closing, and all these greasy men would come piling out. They'd call, "Hey babe." You just didn't know what was going to happen. Anything could happen.

Did anything happen?

Not when I was on the streets. I'm still amazed that I never got into any trouble.

I had a friend and I would stay at his place every now and again. He used to front me drugs, and I would sell them on the street. Nobody knew. The cops had a vague idea, just before I quit, that I was hustling drugs.

What kinds of drugs were you selling?

Pot and hash. The basics. It was always a quick turnover for that. You didn't really have to worry about it.

I used to walk for hours and hours and hours on end. Just walking around.

What did you see?

Filth. I was seeing a lot of dirt, a lot of violence, a lot of anger. I was never on the hot seat when I was on the streets because I kept low key.

Did you always have a place to stay that had a roof over it?

No. I'd sleep in underground parking lots, or I'd go and sit in a cafe and stay up all night on coffee. Once I did three days with no food, just coffee. Up all day drinking coffee. Up all night drinking coffee. Three nights and two days.

I was really into music so I'd go to a lot of the gigs. I would turn on the charm and pick up some guy. He was always a very nice person, good looking. I would go home with him, and I'd have a place to sleep at night. I could never ask for money. It had to be 'circumstantial.' I did that a lot.

I talked to lots of different people.

What did you learn?

I would look around and I would see these kids on the street, starving. I always took myself aside. Even though I was down there and did the whole street scene, I never really considered myself a 'street kid.' Finally I realized that I was living on the streets and that I had been for some time, that maybe I should change and get out.

It was my ambition that got me off the street. What I wanted out of life was not there. Anything that happened there, that looked like a positive thing, would never last. Your focus is so geared toward basic survival that you don't have much room to manipulate your environment or to direct it. You would just see the opportunity and grab it. It was your one opportunity for one meal so you'd go for it.

Since I've come off the streets, I've watched people come off the streets and go through the sudden big awakening that you have the power to manipulate these basic survival skills and to be able to work with them. You almost get panic stricken because now there are repercussions if you screw up.

I guess that was a big thing too. The fear of being reprimanded for anything. When you were on the streets, you were a living reprimand. You were everybody's worse nightmare, so it didn't matter anymore. You could do whatever the hell you wanted to. Be obnoxious. Everything you are fighting is control, so you don't take control even of your own life. You see all the bad sides. Or you've dealt with all the bad sides. The big eye.

It was just the look in people's eyes. A businessman would walk by and look at you as though you were the scum of the earth, because you didn't look like him, and you weren't living the way he was. A lot of them wouldn't talk to you. Some of them did. It was always great when a business man would sit down and hear everybody talk. You would have

five street kids around him chattering away, especially if they were all knocked out on caffeine.

It was always like,

"Hey, you guys have a brain in your head."

"Yea, of course we do. We're not idiots. We wouldn't be able to survive down here if we were idiots. Stupid people don't make it on the street. They just don't."

What happens to them?

They just kinda disappear. I didn't meet anybody who was not aware when they were on the streets. It's so subtle, and it's never really spoken. You can read people easily. Somebody would sit down to talk and my first reaction was, "What do you want? Why are you talking to me?" I'd start laying into people.

There were good times too. There was a lot of fun to be had. I was like the fool, the jester. I've been trying to stay away from using the word, but it is a freedom. Freedom of mind expression. Anything crazy or weird that you want to do, you do it.

If you're a street kid, nobody notices.

There's lots of drug and alcohol abuse. I shied away from it. I was able to put myself outside of myself and say, "Well you're in a very touch and go situation where anything goes. You're still sixteen years old. Keep your head together. This isn't going to last forever." Until I had something more stable, I swore I wasn't going to try anything in the way of banging, no powders, no nothin'. Strictly hash and pot and coffee. I wouldn't even drink at that time.

You had a strength which saw you through this. Can you tell me about that?

Secrecy.

Something I learned from my mom is that you never give all of yourself to one person, because at any time that person can walk out. They walk out with part of you, and you're left with this person that you don't recognize any more because you've come to depend too much on somebody else. I would never depend on anybody. I would never expect anything of anyone. I wouldn't accept help from anybody. I wouldn't accept money from anybody unless I had done something for it. If I was with friends I would accept a five dollar bill because we could all go out for coffee. If I was by myself I wouldn't take it.

One night I was sitting in a heated underground parking lot reading a book. A security guard came by and said, "You can't stay here all night." I said, "Yea yea, I know. Don't hassle me. I'm just sitting here reading a book." He gave me a looney to go and have coffee. It was hard to take it from him. I'm sure I blushed from head to toe. But I wanted it so bad. It meant I could go and sit in a cafe for three or four hours where it was warm and have a hot cup of coffee, smoke my lungs out and write and read and draw. I had a total self-entertainment system. Three books; my drawing, my writing and my reading.

And my deck of tarot cards. My friend called me the Granville Street Psychiatrist.

Were you that?

Yea, for some people.

What did you give them?

I was an ear for people to talk to. I would get all kinds of people coming to me. I would find a place and put out my little sign that said, "Tarot Card Readings - By Donation." I

had one woman who was coming to me because her marriage was falling apart.

I was more willing to help someone else out than I was to help out myself. If somebody gave me five bucks, I looked for someone to spend it on.

How did you decide to leave the streets?

That was an interesting night. It all happened all of a sudden. I decided that my mother and I had to sit down and talk. I was getting nowhere. I was starting to get depressed about being on the street. I can't deal with depression. I don't like seeing myself unmotivated or not happy. I can put up with a lot of shit before I start getting upset about it. The inner depression, coming from the inside and working its way out. Before, the streets were my entertainment, my show. After a while it became taxing, and things became more and more real. This is reality, this survival instinct.

I finally decided to get myself off. I went and had a pizza with my mom. Usually I won't sit down and tell somebody the whole scoop. It's hard to pinpoint the reasons things happen when you're down there. They just do, and you just accept that they happen that way. It was a reality blast when I began to learn that I could manipulate my circumstances to work for me.

So I told my mother exactly what the streets were like. I knew she didn't want to hear it. I sat down and gave her the whole spiel. I said,

"Look, this is what I'm doing. Take a second look at me. I'm your only daughter. I'm your only blood relative besides your mother, who you don't get along with, and your brother, who you haven't talked to in five years. Give me a break here."

She said that she would pay one month's rent for me in a place if I would have a job by the end of the month. Within a week I had a place, a part time job, and I was moved in and ready to go. I was bussing tables in a vegetarian restaurant. I was staying at Heatly and Cordova. We had hookers in our back alley. All my room-mates were totally neurotic dead-heads. That lasted for two months.

The repercussions of screwing up were my biggest fear. I never wanted to do anything wrong. I didn't want to deal with confrontations. I was sick of confrontations, miscommunication, fighting. When you are on the streets, you have no responsibilities other than to yourself, and anything you do aside from that is just a good deed. If you took somebody out for dinner, you didn't expect them to take you out for dinner.

Self-discipline isn't something you have to deal with on the streets. There isn't any self-discipline.

How long did you spend on the street?

Probably close to a year, and then on and off. I find it really hard to get out of my system. I've talked with a lot of people who find the same thing.

What is it that you have trouble getting out of your system?

Just being down there. When you're there, you're so absorbed in it and so much a part of it. It's such a reality for you. It's like going home, going somewhere that's familiar to you. It was the first place that was familiar to me; to me, myself and I, without any family. Nobody knew anything. It was just me and the streets.

Leaving the street is like a withdrawal from alcohol or drugs.

I go back to see who's around and look at all the places I used to hang around in. It's like visiting a town that you

used to grow up in. That's where I did most of my growing, I think.

What did you have coming off the street that you did not have going on the street?

Awareness. Open eyes. A greater sense of myself and what I wanted out of life and the steps I knew I needed to take to get it. For me, it meant doing everything on my own.

Street kids are so misunderstood. People label them as people who don't want to have responsibilities and that that is a BAD thing. It looks like they don't care enough about themselves that they don't go out and get a job or a place to stay. That's the farthest thing from the truth.

It's not that you don't care about yourself. Most of it is a self searching. That's how you wind up there in the first place. At some point, someone has tried to make you stop growing. "Okay, now that you've grown, you have to go do this; job, house, life." There's no freedom in between. You go from school to a full time job. Get your money together and get out of the house. It felt like there was no room for asking why. That's a lot of what I was doing when I was down there on the streets was trying to find out why, and how everything works.

Did you find out?

Part of it.

- end Chapter Two -

Table of Contents

Chapter Three

Kevin Graves

“It's a Tunnel”

Over coffee in the cafe

I came out from the south of England, in Cornwall. It was a rural community, countryside, ocean, right on the coast. My education wasn't going very well in England. My parents had split up, and my father had moved to Canada. My mom remained in England with my sister.

It was arranged through my parents that I would come out to Calgary and finish my schooling. It was a shock, moving from the English countryside to Calgary. The second shock was to find that my dad had remarried. This didn't go over very well in my head. I resented the whole Canada trip to begin with. It was a foreign country. I could write letters and call my mom back in England, but that wasn't the same. It messed me up and I didn't know where to turn.

After a year of living with my father and my new stepmother, it got to the point where she said, "Look, either you leave or I leave." She was getting fed up with me being rebellious towards her .. and likewise. So I picked up my stuff and went for it.

I tried to go to school for the first while, while living wherever. That didn't work very well. I didn't get nearly enough sleep, nearly enough food or nearly enough mental time to try to go to school.

How old were you?

I was fifteen turning sixteen. It was April 1986.

So you walked out on the street. What happened?

For the first little while, I lucked out. A friend at school was letting me sneak into his basement at night. I was only allowed to go there at 11:30 or 12 o'clock at night. I would sneak in when his parents had gone to bed.

She caught me one day and actually offered me a place to stay for a while. It was okay, but it wasn't. I felt I was taking advantage and didn't feel comfortable. By this time I had made a few friends that were living on the edge. Instead of living in the suburbs, I migrated to where the rest of the street kids were living, downtown.

It's there that I learned things like panhandling and basic survival, where to crash, where to have a good time, how to get enough money to have a good time, how to eat, how to live.

A typical day would start about six in the morning. I would usually be very cold. There were one or two drop-in centres where I could get free coffee and sometimes sandwiches, if I was there early enough. The rest of the day was spent on local malls or on a downtown corner panhandling .. usually for beer or for drugs at night.

As the day waned on, sometimes I went job searching. Sometimes I went searching for better places to sleep the next night. I might find an abandoned building and go check it out. As the evening came on, it was time to party. A lot of the kids, who weren't living on the streets, would come downtown, and we would get together with them. I was into skateboarding at the time. That was how I got around the downtown core. I didn't use transit because I couldn't afford the fare. I'd skateboard. Then around twelve o'clock people with homes would go home. The people who had nowhere to go, in groups of two or three, would go find a stairwell or a

squat or a building, places that they knew they could stay for the night.

Lots of things could happen during the day that would throw the pattern completely out. You could get in trouble with the law. You might get harassed for panhandling.

You might rack up a number of tickets during the summer and come winter, when it was really really cold in Calgary, you could walk into the downtown police headquarters and turn yourself in. You'd get up to two or three weeks with three meals a day and a warm place to stay, just to get your strength back up again.

If you break into an abandoned, boarded up building, the law book says that that is break and enter. You've committed an offence when you are inside this building, sleeping. There was a place in Calgary called Earlton. A whole neighbourhood had been abandoned. It was about five streets in a square block. They were very old houses. I guess they were some of the original houses built in Calgary. The neighbourhood had run down, and nobody wanted to come in. They were boarded up, and the neighbourhood was just dead. That was paradise for street kids. We'd kick in a basement window and crawl in. Sometimes there was even electricity, maybe even appliances that could be used. In winter when it's minus forty outside, an abandoned building is the place to be.

There have been times when I have been woken up at two in the morning with someone poking my ribs with a billy club. We would be woken up and everybody gathered in a room where names were taken. Tickets and fines were handed out for being there. Then we would be threatened with arrest and jail. A lot of police officers became pretty familiar with the faces that were on the street. They actually made a task force to deal with vagrants. It was always on

the edge. You were always looking behind you checking things out.

I don't think I ever fully slept when I lived in a squat. The slightest noise and I'd be up, perfectly prepared to run or hide. I felt safer usually when I went off and found my own stairwell. Stairwells seemed to be the best for me.

I'd go find a large hotel or a building, enter the building through an underground parking lot, then climb into the stairwell and either go to the very top or the bottom, depending on how the stairwell was built. I'd lay my blanket down there and lie down for a while.

I was very careful not to leave cigarette butts behind and clean up my garbage. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to use the place next time. A janitor or security guard would notice obvious signs of people staying there and would report it to the building superintendent and then of course I would be popped the next time I was down there. You might be lucky and just be asked to leave. Some people though would call the police and let them deal with it.

Three of us stayed for almost a month at a hotel before we finally got caught. It was great because we could sneak into the kitchen and get some free food at night. We stayed in the stairwell, and at one point, we stayed in the bottle room. One night we got caught and they held us there until the police came. My friend got hauled downtown and me and a young girl got put out on the street. It was really cold. There was nobody around. We just went off and found somewhere else to lie down for a little while.

One Christmas, everyone in my group had been invited to some sort of Christmas dinner, and I had nowhere to go. On Christmas Eve I was feeling lost and sorry for myself. I found a very warm stairwell in a bank in downtown Calgary. I had managed to sneak into the parking lot. I went down to

the very bottom of this building and curled up with a blanket and an old sleeping bag and fell asleep. Every now and again I would get up and use the public washroom. I was off and on sleeping for almost two days.

A security guard showed up and asked how long I had been there and what I was doing. He asked me why I was there and I said I had nowhere else to go. It was cold outside and I wanted a place to stay.

He said, "Aren't you supposed to be at home with your parents? It's Christmas time."

"No, it's not possible this year. It's not happening."

"Well listen, why don't you stay here, and I'll go get you something to eat."

I was suspicious of that. It usually resulted in authority showing up with all kinds of problems. I was tired and just in the way he was talking to me; it seemed that he really cared. I stayed in the stairwell, and about half an hour later he came back with a full Christmas dinner, turkey, stuffing, vegetables and a small Christmas cake. He didn't tell me where he got it. We sat down for an hour of his shift just talking until he had to go back and patrol the building. He let me stay there for the next two nights until his shift was over. That was one of the few times I got a good night's sleep. I felt safe there. Every day, he'd come by and check on me and share a cigarette.

Cold notwithstanding, were you in any physical danger while you were on the street?

Panhandling on Electric Avenue, the major bar strip, had its dangers. You could be assaulted by some drunk quite easily. Some of my friends got beaten up pretty badly, by people that had been kicked out of a bar and needed something to

punch, or wanted to see if you had any money yourself, because they had run out.

There were areas around the train tracks where it was good to sleep and be out of the way of the general public. The CP Rail security guards were as well equipped as the city police. They've been known to punch and knock people around because of the constant flow of kids squatting in this underground station.

I didn't get stabbed. I didn't get assaulted ever. Luckily I could run fast enough. I did have friends who had to go to the hospital for hypothermia. One young girl lost the tip of her little finger to frostbite.

In wintertime, a bunch of people would get together with a little bit of money and get a cheap apartment somewhere. These houses would turn into big crash pads where you have up to fifteen people all sharing a one bedroom apartment in the winter. In the summertime, you can get away with sleeping almost anywhere outside.

There are people who don't do that, who don't have enough friends to get a situation like that. We were a group and we called ourselves The Pirates. We realized that Calgary winters can kill, so we'd do our best to collect a couple of hundred dollars each, one way or another, for shelter.

There is a lot of substance abuse on the street. Drugs made me happier. They made me feel good. I was fortunate that I never got involved in the harder drugs. I was mostly doing the soft drugs that you smoke.

Drugs became a good source of income for people that live on the streets. There were certain places in the downtown core that drugs were sold. Once you became a regular face down there, the dealers, instead of risking their necks asking people on the street if they wanted to purchase drugs, would get street kids to do what's called finning. I was given a

twenty dollar amount of drugs by the dealer. I would break it up and sell it for twenty five dollars and keep the five dollars and a pinch of smoke for myself. Finning was an activity I was involved in for at least a couple of months.

I became quite a con artist. I could talk my way into money. Sometimes I could talk my way into sleeping at friends' places. There were several kids who would come downtown who had a good family life. They saw how we were living and invited us over. Their parents would be shocked at what we were going through and let us stay for a couple of days.

I got to the point where I enjoyed panhandling. It was as soon as I started enjoying panhandling that I realized there was something wrong here. I jumped out of myself and said, "Wait a minute. This isn't right. There's something very wrong here."

What?

I didn't like the feeling. There were people who would pull out a five dollar bill and make my day. I'd feel euphoric. Or there would be people who would say,

"Look I'm not going to give you any money, but we're going to go into this restaurant here and sit down and have a meal and chat."

That was really nice. But then there were people who would shake me up and down and say, "Why the hell are you harassing me for your drugs or whatever?"

That always left a bad taste in my mouth. I felt bad that I'd probably ruined someone's day even though all I wanted was a six- pack and something to eat. I won't do it anymore.

Also there is that one day that you don't want beer, that you're not panhandling for drugs. The one day that you're really hungry, and you want something to eat. It's going to

be the one day when no-one is going to help you. Then you realize that your stomach and well-being rely completely on somebody else. That's scary. "Wait a minute. I'm completely helpless here." You just keep on going and hoping that someone will help you out. After a while I would feel really insignificant and small.

I learned the soup line locations, and where the free meals are, and where the delivery truck will show up so I could snag a few loaves of bread. I learned which hotels left the kitchen door open at night.

It all left me with a feeling of stress. Feeling paranoid and slinking around, looking over a shoulder, wondering when I would be grabbed or arrested.

It taught me to really respect what I've got. I didn't have a lot of stuff. I had a skateboard. I had clothes. I had shoes. But that was really it. I didn't have a tape player or a nice painting or anything like that. What I had was just small little knick knacks, certain things that brought happy memories.

I also learned to respect that there are people who don't understand my situation. When someone on the street told me to go away when I was asking for money, because I was tired and hungry, it taught me that it was not necessarily their fault that I was there. To think all the time that someone, who I asked for money, was going to give me money was a kind of bigoted attitude. I learned that it's give and take. I was in that situation and would have to do the best I could to get by. Nothing is handed to you. In one way or another, you have to go out and get it.

I learned that anything is possible. There were some wonderful experiences on the street. I don't think that someone who hasn't been there would understand. Some of the best friends I have in my life right now are friends that I

made while living on the street. I was lucky. I had a group of friends that were doing exactly what I was doing. We stuck together and worked together. No one would sit down and make a daily plan, but there was a group of friends that were making sure that at night everyone had a place to go .. or that everyone had a bit of money for beer or food.

And there were the old guys. These were people living on the street who we got to know. They were sixty years old and spent their whole lives gathering pop cans and recyclable things and taking them to depots, and getting enough money to eat. They had specific places where they slept. I'd bump into one of these guys, sit down and share a cigarette and have a chat.

Probably the scariest part of it is when you're on the streets and thinking, "Well this isn't so bad. No one tells me what to do. I can do my own thing." But when I'd listen to these guys talking about how long they've been on the streets and what they have to do to get by, I found myself thinking, "I don't want to be them. I don't want to be that old and be on the streets. This isn't where I want to be. I want to move out of here one day and do something different. I don't want to be trapped in this rut forever." Even though I was doing okay on the streets, there was no way I wanted to do so well that I thought I could stick with it. For me the goal was to get through this and to find something at the end of the tunnel.

How long were you in the tunnel?

Two or three years.

How did you leave the streets?

People would come back from the coast and say, "Wow, Vancouver is incredible. The panhandling is unbelievable. The weather's nice. Squats all over the place. Lots of cool

people. The west coast is great. You oughta check it out sometime."

Some of my close friends went off to check out the west, and I followed them. I threw together a bag of belongings and a few extra clothes and my skateboard and thumbed it out to Vancouver.

Vancouver shocked me. It was way more intense. There were way more people. A lot more scarier people. The police were a lot less tolerant. Then I heard about some people who moved to a small island and were trying to live on a farm and were getting away from it all. They had found this little sanctuary.

I checked it out and realized that there is a lot more to the west coast than Vancouver. By this time I had met someone I want to stay with for the rest of my life. Together we backpacked and hopped around and tried to find a place to stay and work with a community. That's where I am now. We're raising a son now and that requires me to be stationary, but we're still portable people. Once my son is old enough to be a little more independent, we're going to check things out again. Not on the street level. The cities are completely taboo for me now. Cities make me sick. If I go to Vancouver, I get a cold, nausea, headaches. I feel almost claustrophobic when I am in cities now.

How I came west was to get away from that, and Vancouver wasn't the answer. People would say, "Well you've got to go west and Vancouver is it. There's so much happening." No no no. Vancouver wasn't it. Vancouver was crazier, worse than Calgary. At least in Calgary, the downtown core is pretty small, and you get to know quite a few of the people there.

It wasn't until I came out here that I had seen the Pacific. I found my niche when I found forests and trees and beaches

and the ocean. I made the decision in my mind that this is where I want to be. This is that light at the end of the tunnel.

I came here with the attitude, "Don't abuse this. You found it. Now you're in paradise. Relax." If you're going to be part of a community you have to be contributing in one way or another. Now I have a partner and a job and a son.

I guess you could say I am a success story.

Anything else you want to say?

Yea. Don't take anything in this interview as glorifying street life. It's not something that I would wish on my worst enemy. Some people want to be pilots and they have to work five or six years in the trenches finding out how a plane works, going through this horrible phase before finally they are flying. The streets are a hard life lesson. They are the bottom of the bottom. The fact that I did make it through isn't to say that it was fun.

When you're lying by yourself looking at the top of a concrete stairwell, and you can hear footsteps coming down the stairs, you're just hoping that those footsteps belong to someone going to their car or just going right on by ...

- end Chapter Three -

Table of Contents

Chapter Four

Sherry

"It's So Sad"

On the sun deck at the deli

I used to live in Hawaii when I was sixteen. Things weren't working out so my parents sent me back to Calgary to live with my brother.

I used to visit a little place downtown in Calgary where all my friends hung out. They read poetry and bands came. At twelve o'clock at night, I'd go back home in the suburbs, and I'd wonder where everybody else went. I'd see some of my friends go, and I didn't know where. It was my first glimpse of what people were doing downtown. They had nowhere to go.

Then I moved away from my brother's house because he kicked me out. I just had two days to find a place. I found one and it was the scummiest place you could imagine. In the forties, it used to be a boys' prison. It was a weird apartment.

Some people found out that I had a place to live, and they'd come to stay with me. I'd always open my door to lots of people. They were sleeping on my floor.

I was going to school, and then I quit because I couldn't handle it along with paying rent and everything else. Then I had a house trashing party and I met a lot of new people. They started living with me all the time. Then I didn't have a place. I had to go to court and the charges were dropped on the house trashing.

I got a place and got a job, and the same people that trashed my apartment started staying with me. Then I went to Vancouver for a month, and I started living on the streets there because I didn't have any money.

I stayed in a squat in Vancouver. It was an old building down on the end of Robson. We boarded up the windows. It was so weird staying in a squat for the first time. The skinheads and the punks were there too. I took it all as a new experience.

You were comfortable with it?

Yea, it was just something new for me. It was weird that people could actually do this, that people had been living like this for a long time. It was an experiment for me.

I only stayed there a few nights, and then I found a different place, a friend's place in Vancouver. They let me stay there.

Then I went back to Calgary, and I didn't have a place anymore. I had given my keys to one of my friends, and when I got back nobody was there and my place was totaled again.

Then I lived on the streets for about three months. I found out what it was like. We panned during the day and then drank all night, just to forget about whatever. When I was panning, people would say,

"Well you look okay, you don't need money."

I couldn't believe that there were people who had been doing this for years. I only did it for three months. I lived in paper bin boxes and stairwells.

Tell me about paper bin boxes.

They were great. One of my friends introduced me to them and said, "If you need a place to stay to get out of the rain, go to these bin boxes." I had to take the train to them because they were out in the suburbs. I'd stay in them, and they would be warm. They were the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in. The papers just mold around you.

Weren't you afraid of being dumped in a garbage truck?

People would stuff their papers in there and be really shocked because fifteen people would all jump out. There was one time when the truck driver did start to pick up the bin to dump it. We started banging on the sides of the bin yelling, "Hey, hey, hey!" The guy jumped out of his truck and said, "Whoa! What are you guys doing in here?" It totally scared the hell out of him. I thought it was funny.

So this was a cozy place to sleep?

Yea. It was away from the rain. Sometimes I used to sleep by myself when I didn't have anywhere else to go. It was all right. I also used to sleep in stairwells. I'd find myself in the weirdest stairwells.

I'd get way up high in an apartment building, the 20th floor, and sleep there, very quietly and get up in the morning.

You had friends?

Yea I had friends, street friends. My brother never let me stay there anymore, and nobody really helped me out. Panning wasn't really that bad, but it sucked, asking people for money all the time to make a living.

I didn't have a place to stay. I didn't have a job. I didn't have much in the way of clothes. I was trying to get started. Sometimes I would be offered a job, but I didn't have a place to stay. So waking up and trying to get to this job and

stay clean was the hardest thing to do. I just wanted out. So I just drank all the time.

For three months I was fine. I experienced it. It was the summer and so that it made it okay. In the winter, I don't think I could have handled it.

I hear that you had some fun, but I'm also hearing some desperation in your voice.

I'd wake up, and I didn't want to be here anymore. I'd drink all night and forget where I was. It was the same routine every day, day in and day out. It was \$10.95 for four litres of beer and a dollar for a hot dog. That's what I needed to survive. If I was lucky I'd get two or three hot dogs. A looney got me a hot dog. The grossest things, but that's what I survived on for a long time.

I had a bike so I could zip around everywhere. I used to just pass out with my bike wherever I was. I would be sleeping in the bushes with my arm draped around my bike.

A few times people came up to me and said,

"I'll pay you money to come back to my house." These men that came up to me used to think that they could do anything, have anything from me. It was hard.

I remember getting a girl off the streets. Her parents were looking for her. She was thirteen. She was a prostitute. She got mixed in with the wrong crowd. These young girls would come downtown and go, "Wow!" with the glamour of it all. It wasn't really glamorous. They just wanted their freedom. They would hang around, and then we wouldn't see them for a while and then find out what happened. It was sad. They had it a lot tougher than I did.

Parents would come downtown looking for them and would ask that if I saw them to please call. There was one girl who

I found, and she went home and then she'd run away again. I kinda kept track of her, but I don't know what happened to her.

A lot of street kids were abused and that's why they were there. They left home because it was a better life. Their home life wasn't happy. I had it a lot easier than those people.

But nowhere was home.

Nowhere was home.

I remember my mother came in the summer to visit me. She'd drop me off downtown.

She said, "Is this where you want to be dropped off?"

"Yea, this is it."

She looked around and said, "Well, where are you going to go?"

"I don't know. I'll find a place."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes mom. I'm okay. Don't worry about me. I'll make it. Whatever."

And I've made it so far. I'm glad I've had that experience. I've started with nothing, and now I have a son and a partner, and I'm somewhere. I'm not on the streets. I'm not in the city.

I don't want them to get involved in prostitution. When I was in Vancouver, a lot of girls did that. It was sad. A number of the guys too would go onto Davie in Vancouver and sell themselves.

I'd rather pan to get my food. Whenever I panned, I'd only pan for what I needed that day. I would give all my extra change to the older guys.

I'd sit down with them and say, "What are you drinking?"

"Aqua Velva."

"Oh yea. Does it have a lot of alcohol in it?"

They were the older people and it was sad to see because they couldn't change their life. I was young. I could change my situation. They were fifty and sixty on Aqua Velva. So I'd give them my change.

"I'd rather give it to you than to us younger people. We have a chance at least." These guys don't want to change. They don't want to go anywhere.

I started at rock bottom. It really was rock bottom for anybody on the streets. The first little while, it was more like, "Wow. This is such a new experience." And then I started thinking day after day, the same thing.

"I hate this city. I want to get out."

There were times I woke up that I just didn't want to wake up any more. I'd have a hangover. Oh the same thing. I'd only drink to forget about it. A lot of the streets I don't remember at night time. I'd pass out. I'd forget. Just blanked out. I didn't know where I'd end up. I ended up in stairwells most of the time. It was hard.

I knew it wasn't going to last forever. I wanted to get out. That was enough for me. I didn't want to live the rest of my life like that. It was tiring sometimes because the people would just look at me and scorn me. They gave me dirty looks. I felt like I was just the low life of it all. But I was an individual too. I'd try to make them see that I was just a

young individual trying to get a better life. They didn't want me to get ahead. They didn't want to help me. Nobody wanted to help me. So all I had were my friends around me and some of them would backstab me. I couldn't count on a lot of my street friends because it's all for one. It's survival. They wanted what they wanted.

The motto was, "My interests are first. Not my friends. Not anybody else. I have to take care of myself. Nobody is going to take care of me." I learned that I have to take care of myself before I take care of anybody else. That's what I did.

Finally I wound up leaving by myself. I went to Vancouver. I stayed in grungy hotels on Granville Street and somehow I just got out of it. I just decided to bike somewhere one day.

I was always a strong person for a street kid. I wasn't going to let it get me down. I was young, and I knew that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life like this.

What was the break?

I was in Vancouver in a hotel, and I had my bike. I had a friend who invited me to go out to the islands. So I just biked up here. I became a nanny for a while, and then I came here to give birth to my son.

You really just walked out?

I walked out. It's as easy as that. You just walk out. People think that you've got to have all this money. I came to Vancouver with five dollars and a day pack. I don't know where it is anymore.

Now I'm renting a house. Now I have all this stuff that I don't know what to do with.

When I have a place that's big enough I'm going to make room, and one Christmas I'm going to find somebody that

really needs a break and get them to work out in the country for a while. If somebody had come up to me when I was living on the streets and said, "Hey, do you want to go work in the country for room and board and get out of this shithole," I would have done it. I would have jumped for joy, "Hurray!"

It's never going to stop. There's always going to be street people.

The ones I feel sorry for are the old guys. I can go down there, and I still see the same faces. They don't recognize me, but I recognize them. It's sad. They can't get out. They don't know how.

Is there anything else you want to say?

If you're not having a hard time at home, don't run away. If things aren't that bad at home, then stay at home. Finish school, and you can do what you want. I never did that. I'm an A+ student now. I'm a lot smarter than I thought I was in high school and junior high. I cheated my whole way through high school. Things weren't that rough for me at home. I could have had a wonderful home life.

Stay at home. The streets are hard. They get you down sometimes. But if you are being abused, and your parents are fighting with you all the time, I'd get out. Find help. There's lots of places for help. In Calgary, there's the Children's Cottage for abused children, or Avenue 17 helps people out and gets them going on the right path.

- end Chapter Four -

Table of Contents

Chapter Five

Sherry & Kevin

“Friends”

In the woods by the soccer pitch

Sherry: Kevin and I used to go drinking all the time by ourselves. We'd go away from everybody and just start drinking. Actually Kevin was the only friend I had to talk to on the streets. He was the only one that understood. He made a crash pad out of my living room floor. I had my own separate room in my apartment. I let these guys sleep there. And he'd come in and talk to me all the time. I couldn't talk to my friends back in the suburbs anymore. They didn't understand my life. He just helped me out a lot. We developed a really good friendship.

Kevin: We were just three guys who spent most of their days panhandling, skateboarding or socializing in the evening.

You remember pulling me on your mountain bike when you were a courier? Downtown, six lanes, one way street with a crazy mountain biker pedaling like hell and a skateboarder holding onto the bike seat, weaving in and out of traffic. Some people say we lived a very strange life style.

Sherry: I can't believe I ever ended up with this guy. Really he was just a friend. The last person I said I'd end up with.

You love each other?

Sherry: Yes.

Kevin: Unquestionably.

Sherry: There are those days though.

Kevin: When it comes right down to it, we're soul-mates. We're together, and we love each other, and we have a beautiful bundle of baby Buddha over there.

Would it have been possible for you to create your relationship without having gone through the street scene?

Sherry: I don't think so.

Kevin: That's not to say other people can't. We'd help each other. I was living in an apartment building for a while because she had a place to stay and gave me space.

Sherry: .. and that's how we became friends.

Kevin: I had a choice between wind and snow and her place.

Sherry: I think that if I didn't have my own room, I couldn't have handled it.

Kevin: This is her. The one who inspired me to go west. The one who called my name sweetly over the great communication network called mail. She painted me tranquil envelopes and sealed them with a kiss.

- end Chapter Five -

Table of Contents

Chapter Six

Zack

“Misery and Mourning”

In the gazebo at the hall

The first time I was on the streets, I was fifteen or sixteen. It was the result of not getting along with my father. There were too many conflicts between my life style and his ideals. He didn't like the way I dressed. He didn't like my attitude. He didn't like my friends. He didn't seem to like anything I was doing.

He would always say, "If you don't like it you can leave."

So I said, "Fine. I'll leave." I grabbed my running shoes and my jeans jacket and walked out. I had no idea what I was going to do. I had about twenty dollars.

I camped out in the area where I lived, in the Toronto suburbs. I'd go to the library during the daytime and sleep. It's the perfect place to sleep, nice and quiet. Nobody disturbed me. I'd just sit down, put a book on my lap and fall asleep.

When my money ran out, I had a few friends who would feed me. After a few weeks, I thought maybe this would put a scare into my folks, and they would give me a little bit of leeway. Maybe they would know that I would take them seriously. If they want me out, I'll leave.

Did you go back?

Yea, I went back, and my dad and I had a talk. He gave me a lot of freedom after that. He never threatened to kick me out of the house. Well, once he did, on a Christmas Eve. I didn't want to go to church.

Things went along okay, and then when I was eighteen, they moved out to B.C., and I stayed in Toronto. I tried to go back to school again. For the first while, I stayed with a friend. Then I dropped out of school. I had a good job and got fired from it because I was just too irresponsible. I couldn't pay my rent and so found myself out on the streets again.

It was still summer, so it wasn't too bad. The weather was okay. For the most part I had friends' places to stay. There was always someone who didn't want me to sleep in the park.

"Come on over to my place. I'll sneak you in."

I did have a run in with a street counselor in Toronto. He was supposed to help kids get off the streets and set them up with a place to stay and a job. He was a psychologist and a youth worker. A friend of mine had known him for close to a year and recommended him.

I was having trouble finding a job and transportation and a place to stay. I thought he was just great and would help me. However, he turned out to be gay, and his kick was to take kids off the street and trade a place to stay and a job for sex. He set it up so that I would end up staying at his place for the night. He had a small one room apartment with a bathroom and kitchen.

I didn't totally trust the guy when I first came in, but my friend trusted this guy more than me, so I put my trust in him. Over the course of the evening, he gave me a few bucks to go and get a pack of cigarettes, ordered some food in, pulled out some wine. He gave me something to drink.

He kept bringing up gay issues with me. I tried to skirt it. I'm not interested. I ended up missing the last bus to get back to where I was staying. So he said, "Crash here." I thought, "Okay, no problem." It was just a small place, so we shared the bed.

In the middle of the night, he started hitting on me. I just shoved him aside and moved over to get away. He ended up trying it a couple of times. It scared me. I jumped up and felt like attacking him. I grabbed my jacket and left and spent the night wandering around the streets of Toronto.

Then what happened?

I found a job drafting. It was a trade that I knew. I told the guy that I would be in on Monday, if I could find a place to stay. I found a place and had a job for a while. That lasted for a few months until I couldn't get along with my boss. I was the new kid in the office, and he blamed me for all the mistakes.

I was away from work for three days, because I had been beaten up by the cops. It was six o'clock on a Sunday morning, and I was walking a bicycle with a flat tire. A friend had loaned me the bike. I had a carton of cigarettes in my jacket. They stopped me, and they were just looking for trouble. They figured my bike was stolen.

They started firing questions at me. At one point I went to sit down on a window sill, and he yelled at me,

"Did I tell you to sit down? No! Get up!" He grabbed me and threw me against the building. The two of them fired questions at me, and when I was not able to answer quickly with the proper words, they'd throw me around again. They threw me against the building a number of times. Then they decided it was time to take me away. They threw my bike into the trunk. Then it took them three tries to get me in the

car. They just threw me into the side of the car. These were big guys and they would just pick me up and throw me.

I tried to be polite with them, but they trashed me up pretty bad. I already had a bad back from a motorcycle accident a few years back. They threw my back out. I couldn't move for three days.

I figured that they were going to take me out of town and beat me up and leave me. I knew a name to use, Detective - --- of internal investigations. I had talked to him before, because I had a couple of cops bust into my apartment and pull apart everything in my room. I filed a complaint against them and talked to this detective. So when they threw me in the back of the car I told them, "Look, I've charged cops before and I'm not afraid to do it again."

They said, "Oh yea, right. Who did you talk to?"

I told them, and their jaws dropped. They got scared. All of a sudden, they were really polite. They drove me straight home, took my bike out and said, "Have a good night." I never had any problems from those two ever again.

So, this was a prelude to getting fired from your job?

My back was out for three days, so I couldn't move. My phone had been disconnected. When I came back into work, my boss was really pissed off, understandably. I tried to explain to him what had happened. I quit, and he fired me at the same time.

Then I spent a few weeks scrambling to do whatever I could to pay rent. I had a couple of odd jobs once in a while. I was selling drugs for a while. I ended up losing my place, and I was on the streets again.

Why I lost my place and ended up on the streets was that my girl-friend was killed. I didn't know that she had been

killed. I just freaked out one evening for no apparent reason. All of a sudden I blacked out. I beat up my friend and trashed his girl-friend's car. They took me home, and I trashed my apartment. I don't remember much of it. I got filled in later on. I wreaked this path of destruction across the town, kicking in cars. There were five cop cars out looking for me that night. They didn't find me.

I found out my girl-friend had been killed the next morning when I came back to some friends' house.

They said, "You're staying with us."

How was she killed?

She was killed by a drunk driver. She was crossing the road, and she never even saw it.

I was at my friends' place for about a month. Then my best friend killed himself. I was in a pretty twisted state of mind. That was the end of the summer, and I was in a daze for months.

A few weeks after that, everyone moved out of the house I was staying at, and I was on the streets. I didn't have any place to stay then. I was wandering around with two small satchels with my clothes in them. That's it.

I had places where I could get food. Friends would feed me. I'd bum cigarettes. I'd go over to somebody's place and smoke a joint. I'd go to a cafe at one o'clock in the morning and get all the sandwiches that were being thrown out.

My sister took me in for three days, and she ended up kicking me out of her place because I had smoked a cigarette in the apartment. She wanted me to smoke out on the balcony. I went out on the balcony, on the tenth floor, and had a smoke. I remember tossing the butt down and watching it fall and hit a car. I just had this great urge to

follow it, dive down after it. It scared me. I went back inside and had a cigarette inside. She got up in the middle of the night and smelled the smoke, got mad and kicked me out.

I never did get along too well with my sister. My hair isn't right. My clothes weren't right. I had a mohawk and boots, the works.

She said I could stay there so long as I cut my hair and, "don't wear those boots."

She kicked me out, and I ended up outside in the middle of a blizzard. I spent that fall, almost until Christmas, on the streets.

Where did you stay?

Stairwells. People's homes sometimes. Wherever I could get by.

How did you feel at the time?

I was pretty much in a daze most of the time. I had so many questions in my head about life. My girl-friend and I had been so intensely in love. It blew me away. I remember one time crying because she loved me. We loved each other so much that I cried because I was so happy. All of a sudden, boom, and she's gone.

And my best friend ... gone. And I was wondering, "What's going on with life? Why are we here?" Watching people, trying to figure out what everybody is doing.

What was it like at night?

Lonely. Sitting in some concrete hallway. Curled up. Layers of clothes. Wondering, why the hell am I sitting here? Not being able to sleep because it was too cold. Feeling sorry for myself a lot. Outraged. Knowing that just around the corner

there were people that had a nice warm house and lots of food.

I didn't have much self-respect. I felt pretty low. I couldn't always get a shower. Walking around dirty, and I haven't had a bath for a while, and all my clothes were dirty. Curling up.

I thought about suicide a lot. My friend chose that as an option, and it was definitely an option for me. It would end all the pain. By that point I had no family. My folks were a write-off. My sister was a write-off. I really had no family to fall back on. There was a lot of misery.

I spent a lot of nights passing the time in donut shops. It was cold. Spending all night in the donut shops waiting for daylight to find a place to sleep. It was always easier to find a place during the day time.

Why can't the world take care of a few kids that are sleeping in a hallway?

I had a friend at a quick food place where I could get fries and a drink and gravy. I would go up and order a large order of fries and a drink, and I'd get it for free. I'd give her a five dollar bill, and she would give me five dollars in change. She'd pull it off with her boss right there. He'd never know.

There would be days when I couldn't get anything to eat. Then just before Christmas, I got \$3000 from the motorcycle accident from a few years before. I, all of a sudden, had money, so I got a place to stay.

I ended up drinking most of the time, sitting in the bar, drinking pints. I felt a lot lighter because I didn't have to worry. I knew this money wasn't going to last forever, and I was going to have to do something about it. I started looking for work after a while. But it was nice just to be able

to relax and not have any worries. I had money, and I could feed myself. I had a place to sleep. It was great.

Then I unexpectedly received an inheritance, and I had a lot of options open. But my mind was what I was concerned with the most. I wanted to stay sane. I lived off that money worry free for a year and a half and just dealt with questions in my mind, about life. I was able to help out other people for a change.

This is a leading question, but I'm interested. Do you think it's possible that this misery is something you had to face in your own life and that these circumstances showed up for you in such a way as you had to face it?

That's basically what I saw afterward. When I had a place to stay, and I'd go through bouts of misery and facing pain, I realized that it really didn't have anything to do with how much money I had. There were things I had to deal with. I found that it was my attitude, how I looked at it, that would make the whole difference.

That period of being on the street, I was always miserable. There would be a few good times, but most of the time I was really down.

I was still mourning the loss of my girl-friend and my best friend. There was a lot of pain there. My girl-friend was the first person who truly loved me for just the person I was, and she was gone. So I found myself in this world where nobody loved me, and I was longing for a bit of caring.

Once there was a friend who put me up at a hotel for the night. We'd been out for coffee. She asked me where I was staying that night.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I've got nowhere to stay."

"Well c'mere. We'll get a hotel."

We sat up talking and laughing and joking all night. It was amazing watching cartoons in the morning. We were just enjoying ourselves. There would be breaks like that every once and a while. It would give me a little bit of hope and keep me going for a while. Somebody would go out of their way to help me and I saw that there was some caring and it would pick me up. I'd feel good for a while.

I learned a few lessons about how I looked at the situation. It was hardship, but no matter what, there will always be hardship. Learning about life was learning how to overcome these hardships.

Now, I am living my life for me. And I am going to have fun. I'm not going to let this world get me down.

Sleep in a park. Ah, the hell with it. It's rough, but I'm not going to let it get me down. I am going to enjoy myself. There have been some intense situations; cops with bad attitudes, people with bad attitudes. I have had to watch my step. I get outraged at society. When it's cold and raining, and I'm standing in a doorway panhandling, trying to get a buck for coffee, so I can warm up, and people are yelling,

"Get a job!"

"Do you want to hire me?"

Nobody's going to give me a job. If everyone that came by dropped me a nickel, I'd be laughing. But I could be out there for a couple of hours and not even have enough for a coffee. Write off getting a meal. Just a coffee so I can get warm.

Are you sane? Are you over the misery?

Now I accept myself as being insane and love it. I go back to the city, and I have a blast. I'll go back to Vancouver and I'll be living on the streets and having a blast. I must be insane. If this world thinks it is sane, I must be insane. This world is just fucked. That was a really big revelation. This world is not sane. In my eyes, this world is insane, killing and letting people starve. We have a corrupt world.

If they're sane, I'm looney. I'll accept that, and I'm going to skip and dance and have fun.

- end Chapter Six -

Table of Contents

Chapter Seven

Raven

“Pure Heroin Kills”

In the early evening before the play

How long have you been on the streets?

On and off for a while. I don't like the streets. I never will. I hope that I never ever have to live in them for longer than the time I have to. I am glad I have here.

How did you live on the streets?

Panhandling. Whatever. I've been really lucky. I've found a good friend who will buy me food and buy me what I need. Panhandling, you can get rice. Fried rice, \$1.75. Whisky, \$11. Beer, \$7. Everything you need.

There is really pure heroin on the streets right now. It has OD'd three people in the last two weeks. There's mesc, which nobody knows how to cut. Mescaline. It's actually not mescaline. It's horse tranquillizer. Nobody knows how to cut it. People are overdoing it. The streets aren't nice right now. The streets have killed a lot of people, fucked up a lot of people in the last two weeks. I'm going to forget it all soon, because I've got a place where I can forget it. And I have friends I can forget it with.

What is it you want to forget?

I want to forget friends asking my permission to do junk. I want to forget friends ODing on junk; friends prostituting for

coke. I want to forget. I want to forget heroin. I want to forget the people who died on it.

I want to go. Right now, it's not nice. Sometimes it's fun, but right now, no.

There is pure heroin, and right now, it's killing people off by the fucking bundle. All the junkies who do it are dying. Because it's pure. They don't know how to cut it. Same as mesc. It's pure, horse tranquillizer. Nobody knows how to cut it.

People are ODing and dying, left, right and centre. And I'm glad I have a place to go.

Did you have a good friend who died?

I've had two good friends who died.

One good friend died a year ago, and my other good friend died a week ago. In the last two weeks, three people have OD'd on heroin.

Honestly, if you want people to hear about the streets, then you've got to go to the streets.

- end Chapter Seven -

Table of Contents

Chapter Eight

Peter

“Trying to Make Adult Decisions”

In East Vancouver

I was fifteen when I went to the streets. I left home. I got involved in crime. I did everything wrong. I had no sense of consciousness.

How did you come to leave home?

I just packed my bags, and never turned back.

What was your home life like?

My home life was better than perfect. My house was enormous. It was clean. My parents both worked full-time jobs at a good salary. Both were teachers. I just got bored. It was mundane. Everyday was the same thing. Wake up at six. Go to bed at nine. Lying in bed until eleven o'clock. I couldn't handle it after a while.

It was an attitude of strict Roman Catholicism that I rebelled against. Get a job. Get married. Get a house. I couldn't see myself doing that. I wanted to experience life first.

One day I want to have a house. I want to have some land. I'd like to be married and have a steady source of income. For now, I'm still living day to day. There is no organization in my life.

Tell me about the day you left home.

I got in a really big fight with my mother, and I went downstairs and I packed three bags with all my stuff. I called a cab and went to the bus depot.

Where was this?

In Winnipeg. I caught a bus to Montreal. I had some savings from gifts from aunts and uncles and relatives over the years. But the money was gone really quickly. The bus ticket was expensive. I smoked a lot of drugs at the time. I wanted to party. The money lasted maybe a week.

Money just wasn't available any more, except on the streets.

How was it available on the streets?

Panhandling. Finning for drugs. Break and enter. Crime. I did a lot of different things. I stole. It was all to stay alive. I left from a high standard of life. I had all the food I wanted, all the clothes I wanted. Then I went to absolutely nothing. At such an early age, it really shook me up.

I didn't know how to act within myself. I was a kid trying to make adult decisions and fending for myself. I think that is what an adult is, someone who fends for himself.

One day you ran out of money. The next thing, you found yourself committing crimes. What happened inside you when you decided to do that?

A bit of me broke down. There was a need to survive. I was going to die if I didn't have that particular object. I needed quick cash to buy something, food, a place to stay for the night. Why not? Do an hour's work and come out of it with \$300. That would keep me alive for a few days.

On the streets, cash goes very quickly if there is nothing to do. I would work for maybe an hour a day and then sit in

the coffee shop buying coffee for the other twelve. I didn't have anything to do. I was bored.

That was one reason I wanted to get off the streets. I saw everyone else doing things and having a life. I saw myself as someone who just sat around. Doing something, whether it's creative or walking, is better than just sitting around thinking about something.

People on the streets just don't know what to do. They're bored.

Did you ever get caught for your crimes?

No, except for the stupid ones. On a break and enter, you have to sit down and work all the plans out. You can't leave finger-prints.

My downfall in Montreal was when I stole a kid's bike. I had to get across the St. Lawrence River into the city. I stole this kid's bike so I could get across the bridge. I was at the metro trying panhandling, and it just wasn't happening. I never thought about asking if they would let me on. I had more pride than that. If I'm going to go, I'm going to pay. I never realized that taking the kid's bike was the same thing as not paying.

So I got caught stealing the kid's bike. I spent three days in jail because I didn't have an address. If you have a number, a place they can put you, you're free. If you don't have a place, they can hold you forever. It works the same way with welfare. You have to have an address. If you don't, you're a nobody. You're a bum.

How long was this crime period in your life?

About four months, hard core. It was in the fall going into the winter.

Why did it stop? You got caught with the bike?

Basically, yes. I didn't have an address at the time, because I was squatting. So, because I was a youth, they shipped me back to Winnipeg into the care of my adoptive parents. I was removed from the scene. This was one of the best things that happened. Otherwise, maybe I would still be in Montreal doing B & E's. I'm really glad I got shipped back.

How long did you stay with your parents?

Not very long. Me and my mom couldn't live together. We'd argue. We don't see eye-to-eye on anything. I see black. She sees red. I moved in with my sister, who is three years older than me.

When I was with my sister, I learned about the Spirit. I learned about what it means to be a human being. Before, I was just acting out of impulse. Now I am putting thought to what I am doing and how later it will affect me. I think that the few months I spent with my sister were the greatest gift the Spirit could ever give me.

In four months I learned more about the Spirit, the Creator, than I did in fifteen years of Roman Catholic education. They were speaking of a God I didn't know. I couldn't see Him. The only way I could relate to Him was as some guy sitting in a chair. That's the only way I could ever see God. To me it was a myth. Just like the Romans had their myth and the Greeks had their myth. God was just another myth. Right now, the Spirit is not a myth. It is a reality. It is alive. Maybe she gave me a different point of view to look at it. Maybe she knew how to make the Spirit present in my life.

If it wasn't for the Spirit, I probably would have wound up on the streets doing heroin, breaking-and-entering all day long. I see past that now. I am now starting to see a future in my life. A lot of the kids are hitting the streets now at a very early age. They don't see a future because they don't

know of a future. When you are fourteen years old, you are just acting out of impulse, living at the moment. A lot of their decisions are quick and rash and not thought out. This is frightening. A fourteen year old is doing heroin. I know a thirteen year old who is running around with a gun. I'm scared for the youth of tomorrow.

What happened after your stay with your sister?

I got bored with life in Winnipeg. I didn't see myself staying there any more. My time there was already done. It was monotonous. Winter was coming, and it was getting really cold. So I took off for Vancouver.

I hitchhiked out here. It was November 15th, and I left Winnipeg at four o'clock in the afternoon, another rash decision. When I leave a place, I always leave at the spur of the moment. I had five bucks in my pocket and ten in my bag when I left Winnipeg. I was going to panhandle my way across.

As I got to Brandon, I hit a snowstorm. When I got to Moosomin, in Saskatchewan, it was about one o'clock in the morning, and I couldn't get a ride. The wind was howling. The snow was falling.

I honestly thought I was going to freeze to death. I managed to wrap myself in a rain poncho to keep the wind out. I was wearing ski pants and ski boots. I just rolled myself up and fell asleep in the ditch and waited for morning.

I woke up the next morning and got a ride to Regina, and from Regina I got a ride right into Vancouver. I got a ride with a trucker, an older man. We didn't speak very much, but we had a friendship. I'd keep him company, someone in the cab to keep him awake and talk to him when he was falling asleep. But I never pried into his life, and he never pried into mine. When we got to Vancouver, it felt like we

had known each other for years. We respected each other as human beings. I realized that I could communicate with someone older. He didn't look down on me. Not too often does that happen here in the city.

Where did he drop you off in Vancouver?

He dropped me off in Surrey. As I was walking, I met a hooker who took me in for the night. It was a fantastic way to enter Vancouver. She was really kind.

Have you ever been without a place to stay?

Many times. I only started squatting when I came to Vancouver. Sleeping in parking lots, abandoned buildings, parks. After a while I learned that if I went to nature, I had a better night's sleep, instead of sleeping in a parkade. Eventually I managed to spend all my time around or with nature, but still co-existing within the city.

Squatting was a really good social scene. Six people walking the streets, not having a home, trying to find a place. You know there is safety in numbers.

How old are you now?

I am twenty-one.

What's happening on the streets these days?

It's getting a lot more intense. The drugs are getting harder. Competition for panhandling is really hard. Everybody is out to make a dollar. I guess it has a lot to do with the recession. There's a lot more people panhandling. Crime is rampant. There's a lot of drugs being sold.

A lot of new people have come and joined the streets. In a way, we are family to each other. We look out for each other. I know that if I don't have any food, or I need a friend

for the day, there's always someone out there who will go panhandling or share their money. If they have food, they'll share it. It is friends looking out for friends. All that a lot of us have is each other. Everyone else is just a face in a crowd, someone to bum money from.

Once I was panhandling. I had my dog. We were out in front of a liquor store at Thurlow and Alberni. People were more giving because I had a dog. They'd see a little puppy dog and a young owner on the streets begging money, and they'd give.

One time I was out front of the Hotel Georgia. I had my hat on the side walk and played with my dog for half an hour. When I looked up, there was sixteen dollars in the hat. Times like that make me love my dog even more.

There are a lot of kids out there who can't get off the streets because that is all they know. The streets are really dangerous. You get sucked right in. A lot of kids don't know how to get out of that vacuum. I'm lucky. I know a lot of people in your book, and they were able to get out of that vacuum. They realize they will never get sucked back in.

How do you get out?

It's something that is within you. It takes courage to say, "I don't need this life. I want to change my life." It's just sticking out your thumb on the highway and going somewhere different. Go to a small little town somewhere. If you want to go back to the city because you are scared or alone, then great, go back, but realize that there is another world out there. If you've been on it for so long that that's all you know, then that's the only world there is. You never think that there's people living in a community elsewhere. Everybody lives in Vancouver. That's your world. It becomes addictive. Day after day there is something that draws you to downtown. Whether it's getting your next meal, trying to

find some cigarettes or just to hang out. It can also be really scary, like a really bad acid trip or a drug trip.

Some nights, the cops are on a rampage. They're busting everybody. They're kicking in heads. It's really frightening at times.

There are a lot of gangs hanging out together. They go around and destroy things and beat people up. Kids who are bored. Street kids are basically harmless. We won't go and punch somebody out just because they wouldn't give us change. On the whole street kids are really peaceful. If you provoke us we can let out a lot of anger, but I've yet to see street kids go and drop somebody just for the sake of dropping him.

I've been chased home in Kitsilano just because I was on a skateboard. Downtown, anything goes. You don't need to be afraid of who you are and what you do.

The streets are a drug. They're very addictive.

It's wild. It's crazy. It's exciting and fun. You sit and watch the goings-on of a hundred to two hundred people at one time. Fights break out. Everyone runs to see what is happening. There's always a cop pulling up. There's always something happening.

You can sit in one spot and see a whole day's activities in minutes. You absorb so much knowledge on the streets. How the police work. How the drug dealers work. How criminals work. You get to learn how the businesses operate and how to scam them, or help them out.

What do you mean, "Help them out?"

A guy from a restaurant took me in one night and gave me a meal.

"Here," he said. "I know you haven't eaten today."

This was true. Later I went back and worked for the guy for two weeks. I prepped and cooked. The money that I took from him was for food and cigarettes. I just took what I needed from him. I was helping him out. It was creating revenue for him.

Sometimes a restaurant person will walk out and give you the day's leftovers. There are people helping people out.

The saddest time on the streets is watching a lot of the older gentlemen panhandling and playing their instruments and hoping for that next nickel or dime. I don't want to be that way when I get to be that age. Now, I don't see a problem with it because I am so very young. I look young and I feel young. I guess in a way I am taking advantage of my youthfulness. Being able to have a lot, but not hold on to anything.

My friends are all on their own trips. One might take off and go to the east coast. One might go down to California. You know you might never see them again, but you feel good because they are doing their own thing. I think that is what a lot of us are searching for. What shall we do in this world? What's our purpose? Is it a nine-to-five job I want to work? Do I want to travel? Now, we're just so bored that we're just hanging out waiting for it to show up on the doorstep. I know that some of the kids think it will just happen to them. It does sometimes.

There are a lot of success stories from the streets. I have a friend who just was accepted for a part in a movie. She was sitting on the streets panhandling, and she looked the part. Now she wants to start a whole acting career.

I've also seen destructive stories. A friend of mine came out here, and he's now sitting in a hotel room somewhere in downtown east Vancouver doing junk. That's what he goes

about doing, trying to find his next fix. I feel sorry for him in a big way, but I also get a lot of strength from that because I don't want to see myself doing that. I'm really scared of the hard drugs that are coming out. A friend of mine just died of an overdose, a week ago. It was shocking. The person he was dating told me about it. The funny thing is, I was smoking dope with him the day before. That's why I won't do it. I'm scared of it. I don't want to die. I'm too young to die.

There is a lot of courage and strength in me because I know that there is something out there. I'm not destined to be on the streets. But I think that some kids don't realize that there is anything else. So why not turn to the harder drugs? Why not send your mind into outer space? This world is here. It's boring. I'm doing the same thing every day. Let's do harder drugs. Let's see how much damage you can do to your brain, just to try and escape it all. You don't realize that you have to physically leave it to escape it.

I'm leaving being a kid. Since I have been on my own since fifteen, I have managed to put myself through a year of private school and through public school. I have just completed my Graduation Equivalency Diploma.

You've done all this while you were on the streets?

Yes. It took me a few years longer than most people, but I got it accomplished.

I think the streets will always be a big part of me. I'll always find a fascination in the streets. I'm sure that when I am fifty years old, I'll want to walk the streets.

- end Chapter Eight -

Table of Contents

Chapter Nine

Dean

“Jumping in Puddles Works”

A Greasy Spoon with Plastic Flowers .. on Pender Street

How come you are so happy, and you live on the streets?

Why shouldn't I be?

You know when you have one of those days. You wake up. You roll out of bed. You put your feet on the ground. You step in your puppy's shit. You go into the bathroom and you realize that there is no toilet paper.

This is just one of those days.

You walk out of the door. You slip in a puddle. You're soaking wet. You fall into it on your butt and your legs. It's raining outside. You go in for a change of clothes in your hotel room, and realize that you locked the keys inside.

Okay, so let's go down to the local diner. Order breakfast and eat it, and then you don't have your wallet. You run out, and the Hastings bus swerves by, and you are splashed by another puddle.

What are you going to do? Are you going to sit there and start crying? Or you could look for the biggest puddle, jump in it and roll around and get really wet, laugh and scream, holler and shout and realize that you really shouldn't take life that seriously.

That's my basic attitude.

I've spent a lot of time being depressed and upset and angry and hurt. These were the painful emotions and are just as valid as the positive ones, happiness and love. I prefer to have laughter around me. If there is not laughter around me, I'll try and create laughter.

You hit rock bottom, and where else are you going to look but up? It's the only direction.

What does rock bottom look like?

Hmmm, let me ponder rock bottom.

Aimless nights of being cold and wandering.

One night we were in another city, in the southern states, and these people let us stay in their hotel room. There were seven of us with three people renting the room. The manager was super cool about letting us in. We stayed the night, and, after morning coffee the next day, we went back to get our stuff. They wouldn't let us in. They wanted to charge \$25 for each person for the night before. She was a bitchy woman running the door this time. She kicked us out.

My friend said something rude like, "Fuck you," and we walked outside. We had our busking instruments in there and our sweaters to keep us warm. My friend had a banjo he could play to get money. We wanted to get our stuff back. We needed it to survive.

Then a pickup pulled up with six people in it. One of them accused my friend of insulting his wife and proceeded to beat the living shit out of him. I got into it, being very angry. I didn't like the fact that my friend's face was being opened from cheeks to forehead. I found myself on the ground with my hands held behind my back.

Then here come the jolly little police asking what happened. I'm hysterically screaming at the people, "You fuckers, you're beating up my friend."

The guy let go of me because the cops were there. The cop looked at me and said, "Get the hell out of here or I'm going to shoot you."

So of course, we got the hell out of there. In the southern states, you listen to cops who tell you to get out of here or they'll shoot. They would literally shoot you. There's no qualms down there. It's a way of life. Unless you have money and can pay them off, they can do anything to you.

So we took off from this situation. We walked down the street and he's bloody and bruised. I'm just bruised. I didn't get cut up at all.

This stranger looks at us and says, "Oh, what happened to you? Come in and I'll clean you up." He just invited us into his home. Amazing. We hung out there, and he let us sleep on the floor. We didn't really want to walk back to our squat. We were paranoid of all these cops.

The next day, I'm sitting in a coffee shop. My friend's face is bloated.

He looks behind him and says, "Dean, look slowly around and tell me what you see." I turned around and I see six people sitting around this coffee table. These six people were the same who had beaten us up the day before. It turned out that the hotel we had messed with was run by the sheriff and his six friends, who were all police officers. So the people who had beaten us up were all cops.

When the cops came the day before, of course they told us to get the fuck out of there, or they'd shoot. We had just been mugged by their fellow policemen.

This time one of the six cops looked at us and said, "Get out of here. You've had your fill."

I said, "I haven't even had a coffee."

They just said, "Get out of here. You're not allowed to be here anymore."

When you've been banged in the head so many times, it begins to hurt. You sit down and your shoulders slump, and you ask, "Should I give up?" But you don't give up. You get back up.

Rock bottom is when you hit your own personal pit. You are sitting wherever you are sitting, in a big house or by the side of an alley. It's not having a place to stay or food. I can always find food. I can always find a squat, be it a doorway or whatever. Rock bottom is when you are emotionally drained. Everything is just gone.

When you fall down, you just don't wait to die. You lift yourself up and keep on walking. So when you hit that rock bottom, all you can do is get back up and keep on truckin'.

I don't know why I left New Orleans. I had a terrific time there. When I look back on any memory or experience, I remember the positives. Of course there were negatives, but the positives came out of the negatives.

I really want to go back to that place. I really love the blues, the music. I love the atmosphere. There was also the shit. There was so much coke. And I am fed up with people with guns.

At one point my friend Tam and I were walking outside of our squat. This guy with a banana bicycle rolls up while we're having an argument. He's interrupting our argument and I said, "Look, excuse me but we're having an argument."

So he left us alone. We kept on with our argument. It was a good argument. We were getting things out of it. Then he bothers us again. We tried to tell him that we wanted to have our argument. The next minute this guy has a gun out and says, "Give me all your money."

I was carrying this leaf about the size of my arm. It was a humungeous leaf that somebody had given me. Tam was carrying this big, funky, weird flower. This was March. It was really hot, springtime.

We said, "Here, look! We're panhandlers, buskers. We have no money, but do you want a leaf?"

The guy just looked at us and said, "You guys are way more freaked out than I am." So he just rode away, and we continued arguing.

Tam had a guardian angel shining down on her, but I always walked face first into shit, plunk into a cop car. I walked face first into all these situations. I walked face first into a sweep.

A sweep is when the cops come by with four paddy wagons and cars and motorcycles. In one sweep I counted twelve police vehicles on one block. They would grab everybody who was a street person and put them into paddy wagons. Usually they would ask for ID, and if you didn't have ID, they'd put you in.

I was sitting in a park with my dog. These two guys came over and were patting my dog. We were in the middle of this park and the cops go, "You three, here." The three of us had to go over. They threw the other two people in the van. They asked me for ID. I thought as fast as I could and made up some excuse about my ID. He said, "Fuck off," and I fucked off.

I stood there shaking, watching. When they opened the paddy wagon door, there were five people I knew in there.

There were twelve people in by the time the paddy wagon took off. Two more paddy wagons, full of people, sped off. I walked down that street and nobody was on the street except for the rich tourists and the suburbanites.

They all got 30 days in jail or \$300 for bail. They had all been arrested for obstructing the sidewalk. Down there, unless you have money, you're an easy goner into the cop car and thirty days.

I went back to my squat. We had just moved from a squat that was diseased. We woke up one day and it took us three hours to get out of bed. My friend was coughing, and she couldn't get up and her head was spinning. Finally we took all our stuff and our friends' stuff and found another place about two blocks away.

This was a nice place. We could lock the door from the inside, and we would just open it up when friends came by. The first day, we were in there, the rooms were cleaned out. We brought in furniture and a stove. We had light. It was starting to become a good working home. It wasn't a crash pad. There is a difference between a crash pad and a squat. The place we lived in before was a crash pad. People were fighting just for fun and breaking bottles. That's a crash pad. It's not a home. This new place was home. I came back there that night, and there were three people left. Everyone else had been taken in the sweep. Just gone. Nobody would notice except the people who knew them.

We had a birthday party, welcoming my friend's daughter to the apartment. At one o'clock in the morning, we were still waiting. We found out that she was arrested in the sweep. We managed to get \$50 up, which was all they asked for her bail, and at seven o'clock in the morning, she showed up for her birthday party.

You don't backtalk to cops there. The more you backtalk, the more thirty days turns into sixty and another charge is invented. Cops who can do just what ever they want are terrorists, complete assholes.

How do you compare the police there to the police here?

Here, you can get out quicker. You can get thrown in the drunk tank and get out that night. I've been in quite a few squats that have been busted by police. In the last one, two people got arrested, one for being crazy and one for refusing arrest.

The other one got arrested for screaming, "Big people are taking me away."

The woman said, "This girl is on high level drugs."

I said, "The girl has had two beers tonight."

She said, "No, she's on high level drugs."

"Who do you think are 'big people taking her away'?"

And the cop says, "I don't know, but she's nuts."

I said, "Don't you think you guys, all you cops, with your big vans, are 'big people' taking her away?"

She said, "Watch your mouth or we're taking you too."

In the southern U.S., they come in riot gear. They don't know what they are getting into. It could be a crack house. If it's a crack house, people have guns. We didn't have guns. None of us carried guns. If the cops come, they come fully prepared to deal with twenty people on crack. It's not a pretty sight.

Cops up here, they're not pretty either. I've met good people. I am not saying that they are all assholes, but it's a

trade, and there's the shit that goes along with it. One cop helped me out with a court case, but I couldn't trust her. They're shitty, but not as shitty as down south. Cops up here go more by the book. They follow their orders, and they add a little bit of their attitude into it. Some people are fair, as far as police rules go.

It can be bad for people who are living in squats and just trying to live. The cops don't like them on the streets so they find themselves a home. Nobody is using the building, and it is probably slated to be demolished in a year. You can get hassled for using something that nobody uses or cares about. They're knocking it down anyway.

I have better luck than a lot of my friends, but I just don't have good luck with policemen.

Tell me more about this city.

I've been in Vancouver for a long time, and I've watched my friends come in and out, and I'm always the person who is still in Vancouver. I sit here, and I rot, and I stagnate in Vancouver.

Somebody comes from the prairies and comes into Vancouver, and says, "Wow, it's so beautiful. It's on the ocean. You've got these wonderful mountains. Are you ever lucky to live in Vancouver."

For a couple of days, I see it through their eyes. I'm seeing Vancouver from eyes that have never seen it. They point out things that I see fifty times a week just walking by and that I forgot to notice anymore. I know the streets so well that it's just habit. It's just the scenery.

Once I was a lot higher on it. I liked it a lot more.

The streets have changed a lot. When I first moved to the streets a few years ago, it was like a family. We'd go back to

our squat. Somebody would bring a loaf of bread. Somebody else would have peanut butter, and we'd all have something to eat.

I'd go out in the morning and grab breakfast. I'd get a fresh roll from a bakery and some little containers of jam. We'd all go off in the daytime and do our own thing. We'd panhandle to get food or drink.

We'd return at night and come back to a family. If you're not there until three o'clock in the morning, people would say, "We were worried about you." Here was a feeling of people watching out for people, caring about where you are, caring about how you are doing.

I would know that everyone around me understands how low or down I could get. They were there for me through the downs and the highs. Everyday of your life you're not going to be happy. People you love the most, you hurt the most. You can snap at them, when you are having a rough day, but you're around them because you want to be around them. You're not always going to be this rosy wonderful person.

For me a squat isn't just a place to live. It's my home. Sometimes it doesn't have a toilet. I've had squats that had a toilet and water. I've never had a squat that had electricity, but I have had a squat with a kerosene stove and pots and pans. Once we had a big lantern. If the room is illuminated, we can cook. We could bring home vegetables and make a stir fry. It's a real motivation to make it home, when you can sit down and make dinner.

I've had nicer squats, and I've had apartments that I've paid rent in. I've crashed out in back allies. I've crashed out on the tops of schools. I've had some pretty shitty squats too. Some of them have had disease from human waste. If I find that people have been shitting in squats, I get out of there

quick. I've seen squat disease. I've seen twelve people living in one house and not being able to get up for four hours. "Why do I feel so sick?" It's because right next door to you is your bathroom, and it is beginning to rot.

My friends were a close-knit group. These were the people I lived with, the people I ate with, the people I partied with. Half of them are dead now. Some of them are dealing guns. Some of them are off in the country. Some are in the United States and England. Too many of them are dead.

Why are they dead?

Different causes. Some OD'd on the messier drugs like heroin or coke. One of my dearest friends committed suicide. Another died in a house fire. Somebody fell asleep driving, and the car went off a cliff.

I have a friend in the hospital right now who just got hit head-on by a pickup truck. He'll be okay, but he should be dead after what happened. Nobody should live completely paralyzed with no face and not be able to see.

On Granville, heroin and coke was there for adults but not on a street kid level. Not many of the street kids were really getting into it. Now, tons of people I know are doing heroin.

Somebody just OD'd from it a couple of weeks ago. Then everybody starts doing it. This guy OD's and he dies, and so people start picking up needles or snorting it, however they're doing it, to deal with the pain. He just died from it! He's dead! I just can't understand it.

I lived with a lot of junkies and people that are trying to get off it. I lived in one house with six junkies who had all quit but were still needing a fix. I was the only one who didn't use it. We sat up all night and wound up getting them a joint. A joint was a feeble substitute, but it was a substitute

to take away from the harsher reality of getting back on heroin.

Why do you stay on the streets?

Where am I going to go? I could go to a youth hostel or some kind of a crash pad place run by Christians where I have to listen to an hour and a half lecture before they give me a piece of bread and a bowl of soup. But I don't need it. I only need the security of my back pack and my writing book.

I know the streets. I have no problem finding food. I'm a pretty good dumpster diver. It's amazing the choice things you can find around the city. Go to a special bakery I know and get tons of loaves of bread. Go to donut places when they close and ask for their left over donuts and you wind up getting this huge bag. You take a few and fill up and then pass the bag onto the next person. Later on that day, five hours later, someone still has the bag and is still passing it on. Everybody from Commercial to Granville has been eating donuts.

You look at someone who has their nine-to-five job. They have their house. And they have their mortgage. They have 2.3 kids and a dog named Fido. And they spend every day grumbling and groaning and coming home from work and complaining. Then they have to cook dinner and dinner for the kids. And then they go to sleep grumbling that they have to get up at six o'clock in the morning for their mundane working job.

I've never worked a nine-to-five job. I don't agree with it. It's a rat race, and when you're caught in it, you're caught until the mortgage is paid off when you are sixty-five years old, and you can retire. By the time you're sixty-five, you do what you've always wanted to do. You go for that wonderful

vacation to Toronto or England or Africa, but you can barely walk anymore.

In my life, I do whatever I want as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. I have no interest in that life, and I don't think most people within that life have much interest in it. They're all looking for something more and better.

I love the nutsos, crazies and the insane things that happen. Being alive.

My friend was depressed one day. She was so down. I grabbed her and ripped her out of this apartment and pulled her outside. She's wearing her underpants with a t-shirt. I'm wearing boxer shorts and a tank top. It's the middle of winter and pouring rain. I pulled her into this puddle and threw her in. We were splashing and jumping at two in the morning. My friend is shaking her head and laughing. We smiled and laughed and giggled. Then this cop pulls up.

The guy looks at us for a minute with the most confused look. He says, "Are you girls okay?"

Both of us turn around just beaming, "Of course we're okay. Yea."

This cop looked so bemused, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yea, totally fine."

"Okay, I'm going to go now."

"See ya. Bye bye."

I just like being able to have fun. I like being able to laugh.

Every time I hear a street musician, my day goes way up. Wow! Right on! There's all these people walking through the Vancouver rush hour traffic, people, buses and cars. Then

there's this one guy on the side smiling his head off and singing a song. You stop and exchange a smile.

Is there anything else you want to say?

Don't take life too seriously.

And jump in puddles.

- end Chapter Nine -

Table of Contents

Chapter Ten

Clover

“Listening to My Inner Voice”

On the Way to the Healing Gathering

Why did you drop out of school?

Because I saw school as an institution for brainwashing and for controlling my life. I wasn't improving anymore. I wanted to explore myself and explore what I wanted to do in my life.

This planet is a Garden of Eden. I'm not about to start destroying it. School represented money and capitalism and who's on top, and who's better, competition and comparison, and evil, and all this shit that I don't want.

When I left school, it was a sunny day, and I wanted to be outside playing in the streets. Being in school was just some fucking lie. They're telling you what history was. That's 'his' history. The history that the controller made. That's his reality. I don't want to be part of it. I don't even want to think about it.

So did you just pack up and leave home?

Yea. I was living at my friend's house. It was hers. Her father paid for the rent, and he was never there. He just let us party in his house. We had this house, and we could talk to each other and just have fun.

I got a job. I had a job phone soliciting because I wasn't old enough to get welfare. I'd call up and say, "Would you like

to buy this?" It was just terrible. I'd get rated on how many calls I'd made, and I'd get a raise when I had made so many calls. It was a weird trip.

Then my friend's dad sold the house, and we had to move out of there.

What city are we in?

We're in Calgary. I had a boyfriend. We talked him into dropping out of school too. We found this house. It was above a butcher place. We'd hang out on the streets. We'd talk to people. We'd panhandle all day long to buy a gram of hash.

I always wanted to go to the west coast. We'd actually first heard about these islands before anything else. We heard about this place, and that's where we wanted to go. It never happened because we didn't have any money. We were caught in Calgary doing the street scene.

There was this place for street kids. They gave you donuts and coffee. They had access to different programs, and they'd tell you about different things you could do. There was one program where you would go to school, and they would pay for your housing and give you grants after you had graduated, to go on to college or art school. But to me that was all a control trip too.

What was the street scene?

The streets were just so weird. People shooting vodka. People beating people up. People rolling people. I was in the punk rock scene. I wasn't a punk rocker myself, but I was in that scene because I was angry and because I could totally relate to it, in the sense of "Fuck you" and that sort of thing. But so much of it was a lot of internal pain and suffering. They wanted to be free, and they couldn't be. Often I saw people with chains beat somebody up. They would

continually rip this person and kick him when he was down, just because he wouldn't give them his studs from his leather jacket. It was so weird. "Give me your boots or I'll kill you. Give me your jacket."

There was always this big group of people hanging out together. I had a specific group. It was really close. It was a lot different. There was still a lot of anger. They'd try to go and roll somebody and be a macho dude. Just to have fun. But they were close and really cared about each other.

We really had dreams and ideas of what we wanted to do, which was different. A lot of street kids would just sit and get drunk every night and pass out and be really rude to each other and themselves. For us, we would get drunk and have fun and talk about what we wanted to do. We wanted to go to Jamaica and start a community. We wanted to do all these fun things together. We really felt like a community, a family together. This was good to have on the streets because you are really condemned and put down; for not having a job and not having a goal in this society to get to a prestigious place.

I was doing acid a lot. We were tripping out on acid all the time. It was a pretty blurry time for me. It was wonderful. I loved it so much. I wish I was there again. Now I have a kid so the responsibility trip comes in. I can't do acid all the time.

What is it you liked about it?

About acid?

No, about the streets.

I could do whatever I wanted to. There was nobody telling me that I was right or wrong. There was no routine, and there was no schedule. There was no timetable that said,

"You have to get up now. You have to do this then. You have to go back to bed because you have to get up at this time."

There was a constant meeting of people. We were constantly getting into debates with Christians and bible thumpers. We could be sitting outside a trendy rich bar and panhandling from people, and they would get disgusted with us because of the way we dressed and acted. We could fully blow up and go running around yelling at them and talking about what fucking bullshit lives they lived in. Just being able to express and yell and scream. Ahhhhh! And not feeling conformed and boxed in because I have these people telling me what a polite woman is. All these roles that are put on me because of how people have been brought up. I felt that I could be whatever I wanted to be. I was a ranter.

Do you still want to do that?

Yes I do, a lot. But now I'm trying to find a place for that. It's different because now I'm realizing that everyone has their own reality. Everybody has what they need to live by. That's their reality, and it's not my place to start ranting about what they're doing. I'm just as fucked up.

I just need to heal myself. I need to live with the earth and live with myself and be dependent upon myself and the earth which has been given to me. Then I will feel stronger about ranting maybe. I won't be such a contradiction.

I need to feel stronger about what I'm saying. I feel kind of weak right now. I've gone through a stage, and I'm feeling weak again.

Were there times on the streets when you didn't like the streets?

Yea. When I didn't have somewhere to stay. Sleeping in a parking lot with no blankets is kind of a shitty deal.

I didn't like finding a house that we could stay in and having it be full of really mean people. They really scared me. I hated not having my own space. I hated not having somewhere to go that I had built with my energy and that was safe for me, that nobody else could come into. I was always going into other people's places. Sometimes it was really scary. I went into some houses in Vancouver that were really big punk rock houses. The people there were typical mean assholes. That was their whole existence. They were just being the biggest assholes they could because they were tired of everything. They would be mean and rude to everybody and wouldn't care if they hurt somebody. Somebody would pull a knife and somebody would get stabbed. I felt like, "I could get that." That could happen to me just because there was so much anger. That scared me for sure.

But I loved it because I didn't care if I didn't have money. If I didn't have money, I'd go out and get it. I'd panhandle. I loved panhandling.

What did you love about panhandling?

I got different reactions all the time. Some people hated it. They were always being put down. To me it wasn't my problem. It was the person putting me down who had the problem. I was really into talking to people. I was really into finding out about their reality and them finding out about mine. I was really starting to learn about pain. I was starting to learn about why I didn't like school, why I didn't like living in the city. I liked panhandling because people would say, "Why don't you have a job? Why don't you go to school? Why don't you do all these things so you'll have a good life?" Right there I could tell them why, and it would be really high, and they would start questioning. I could see it in their brain.

What were they questioning?

I would tell them why I didn't want to go to school. I would talk about not wanting to be part of that reality, part of that power trip. I didn't want to learn that information. There was a whole different, endless amount of information that I could learn. They would want to know, "What?" I would say, "How to build a house. Simple things. How to feed myself. How to garden. How to live with other people instead of hating them." I was in a really powerful space.

What was a daily routine for you?

I'd wake up, and I'd go and sit on the street and panhandle. As soon as I'd made seven bucks, I'd go off to eat at a restaurant. I ate at restaurants all the time. That was fun.

At first, my major priority was drugs. First I would panhandle to get drugs. Usually hash or pot. I always hated hard drugs. I never wanted to shoot anything. I never did crack or heroin or coke anything like that. It was always marijuana, hash or acid. Acid was the hardest. A lot of people would take me out to eat because they thought I probably would spend it on drugs.

Which was probable enough.

Yes.

That was cool. Sometimes I got taken out to ritzy restaurants where I could get whatever I wanted. Other times it was to a fast food place where I could get a cheesy little hamburger and a soft drink.

Mostly my routine was just to talk to people about how I didn't want to oppress myself anymore. I didn't want to live in unhealthy situations. How I wanted to start caring for myself and feeling good for myself and eating for myself. Just conveying that to people. Saying, "You have the power in yourself to do whatever you want, and you're choosing to waste your life on somebody else's job or somebody else's

idea of what they want to do." I had a purpose on the streets to convey a different reality for people. I wanted to learn more about what they are doing with their lives, to hear about them as much as talking to them about what I'm trying to do.

Has your internal reality altered in the course of this?

Yea. For sure. I see that this whole human existence is total bullshit and that my purpose is to heal from that. Just to be clear and straight and together and strong. I'm listening to my inner voice that tells me what it is that I want, what I don't want, what I need and how to get it. I'm working on that now. Before I could rant and rave about it, but now I'm actually working on it. I'm going through my history, going through the patterns that I have of expectations and of lying and painful things that I do to myself and other people. I'm trying to cure these. I've found out that what I was talking about as bullshit is bullshit, and it has affected me just as much.

What about kids that don't make it off the streets?

They're so insecure and unsure of themselves. This is the best that they can be for themselves, the best that they can see of living without control. They get hooked on a lot of patterns of being dependent on other people all the time. Panhandling all the time and getting really dependent on all the people to give them money. Getting hooked on drugs. Alcohol is the biggest problem that I saw on the streets. It just keeps you fuzzy and unfocused and drunk.

I see so many people staying there continually. It has a lot to do with their past. A lot of people have been abused really really harshly as children. Physically abused, mentally abused, anything that keeps them out of body and away from what they need. They are in a place where they keep

calling themselves stupid and crazy and bad, where they feel they deserve to be on the streets.

- end Chapter Ten -

Table of Contents

Chapter Eleven

Nap

“Scary”

In the gazebo

How old are you now?

Twenty-one.

How old were you when you went to the streets?

Sixteen.

Where was this?

This was in Calgary.

How did it happen that you went to the streets?

I wasn't really doing well in school. I enjoyed math, but I didn't enjoy English or the social subjects. I started doing really lousy in school. My parents didn't like that so they gave me the boot. I just went on the streets.

What happened on the day they gave you the boot?

I came home. I had just been kicked out of school. They said, "We don't want that." So I said, "See ya later," and I just left. I packed my stuff and hit the road.

What did you have in your pocket in the way of money?

Nothing. I just packed some clothes and a sleeping bag and left.

Where did you go?

First I went down to the railway station to collect some change. I hung out for a while, panned for money and went and got something to eat. I started living in paper bins. That was weird, but it was like a second home.

Tell me about paper bins.

It's a large metal bin with three doors on the sides. You fold one down and go in and make yourself a hole and bury yourself in papers. Some mornings, the guy from the local food store would come out and wake us up and tell us to get out. This was a wakeup call every morning.

This was a friendly gesture?

Yea. He was cool about it.

Sometimes, we'd scare people, and they'd go and tell on us. They'd throw a bundle of papers in, and they'd land right on you and you'd sit up surprised.

They'd say, "Ohhhh, what are you doing in there?"

It did get scary if you got picked up by the truck. The truck would have you halfway up on the lift. We'd bail out.

Did anyone actually get loaded into the truck?

No. We were always lucky. As soon as you heard the truck and felt the papers sliding to the back, you knew something was wrong. You knew you were in trouble if you didn't move fast.

What would you like to share about street life?

It's a way of life; pan, drink, do whatever, whatever you can to stay alive. Sitting along downtown Granville Street in Vancouver, panhandling for a while. Sooner or later you'll

get kicked out, and you have to move on. Go up Davie Street and pan there for a while. Eventually you might get enough to get something to eat. So you go and get something to eat. Come back out and sit right back down and pan some more for drinking and whatever.

You need something to do every night because it is just so boring. There's nothing to do. You need money to do anything these days so all you can do is wander around and do nothing. Meet all the punk rockers and every form of street life available.

I've met all sorts of people. I've met the junkies, the hookers, the dealers, all the crazy people on the streets. They've all got their own story.

Where did you fit into all of this?

I have a group of punk rock friends in Calgary. Some of these old friends showed up in Vancouver when I came here, and I met a bunch of new people.

What's a punk rocker?

Basically anyone who styles his hair in different colours, like a mohawk or a spiky hairdo. They were just friends to me. They all looked the same. It didn't matter.

I ended up being a part of a network. I know people from the east coast to the west coast. I've traveled back and forth and met people here and there.

Was there violence in this punk rock group?

Oh yea. Lots of violence. There were a couple of guys who would get loaded up, and they'd walk down Robson Street and pick fights with guys with suits.

One Friday night I was downtown, and there was a big gang of oriental people. I was sitting in this park listening to them go by. You could hear them for a block before and a block after yelling, "Kill, kill, kill." They were a mob that would walk around you, beat you up and walk away and not even talk to you. They would totally obliterate your brain all over the pavement. Pretty scary.

How many were in the group?

Thirty to thirty-five. It was a big group, and I didn't want to be involved in it. There was some really bad stuff going on.

On Hastings there are all the junkies. If you go into a bar, and you don't look right, you get beat up. No-one likes anyone else. If they looked at me, they might think I was a narc. I don't dress totally scummy. I don't know what is going through people's brains anymore. There are too many suit and tie guys just going by and ignoring everything.

Some street people are really trying to get some work, and some just don't care. They'll just stay on the streets for the rest of their lives. I've even heard that they were letting mental health patients from hospital right out onto the streets. They have no place to go, and they just wander around.

I met this guy in a wheel-chair. He just used to wheel around the streets all the time. Once in a while, people would pick on him. He'd just sit there in the middle of the street and scream. No-one liked him. They just called him a retard. The only real problem that he had was that he couldn't talk very well. Harsh.

Everyone is putting everyone down because they have different hair styles or dress a little differently. They can't afford expensive clothing and have to go to the Goodwill for clothes.

Why do people wear different hair styles?

They don't want to fit in with everyone else. They don't want a nice short haircut. It's a revolt against society. It is really political for punk rocks and skin heads.

Tell me about the different groups.

There's the nazi skinheads, the sharp skinheads, the satanic skinheads. I met a couple of satanic skinheads, and they were working class. The nazis just beat up people and roll people enough to get drunk every night. Then there are the headbangers, long hairs who sell drugs and hang out where no-one else hangs out. They get in fights all the time. Then there are the hypes, the needle pushers, the hookers. They are all out there. Then there is a Joe Schmoe like me, just out to eat. I was mostly after food, but still people would classify me as a punk rocker. They think street kids are only after beer, so they wouldn't give money.

Kevin and Psycho are just like my brothers. There are a few other people who have been my friends, but they just faded out, back into society.

How did you feel on the streets?

Alone. I don't like to be alone. I'm scared to be alone by myself. I'm afraid I'm going to turn schizo. I have this tendency to talk to myself, answer and question. I need someone around to talk to all the time. Sometimes I feel so alone it scares me. I just hate being alone.

My biggest fear in life is being alone.

And you've not mastered that?

No. It's still really bad for me. When I hitch-hike to Calgary, I'll find someone to go with. Out there on the road, sitting by the side of the road for eight or ten hours can get boring and

lonely. I don't like that. It's always nice to have someone to talk to.

What happens inside when you are lonely?

I start talking to myself. I start verbalizing, "What shall I do now? I think I'll go down to the store and see if I can find someone to talk to." My big thought is, "Where's people? I need people."

If living on the streets was a matter of personal choice, why would you choose that over living in society?

I didn't like working. It's as easy as that. I didn't want a job in an office. I do under-the-table work, nice outdoor work. I'm not much for sitting in an office. In society you either go to work and go home, or you go to work and go to the bar and go home. The big thing is drinking. A lot of people like to drink in the cities. I've done a lot of drinking, and it has messed me up along the way. I got hurt.

How did you get hurt?

Once when I was fourteen in Calgary, I had just finished drinking some J.D. with this guy, and I guess I blacked out. When I woke up, I had a chain mark across my forehead and stitches in my lip. Some guy hit me and whipped me with chains because I was drunk. He wanted to take my money. I woke up with the doctor stitching my lip and said to myself, "Wow, what's going on here?"

I had this feeling of wanting revenge. I ended up seeing him later, and he was whacked out. He was lost. He had tattoos all over his arms. Just not going anywhere. He didn't have any reason for going anywhere. He didn't want to go anywhere. He used to slash himself. I don't know what drives a person to do that, but it's pretty scary.

What other emotion was there on the streets besides loneliness?

A feeling of being scared. Sometimes, someone will just come and punch you just for sitting on a corner, panning. When you are walking down the street, you always have to look behind you because there might be a gang coming up to mob you. In Calgary there was a gang carrying meat cleavers. You constantly had to watch your back. If you saw them coming, you went the other way as fast as you could. It was bad.

Last year a group came after us. Psycho had a pool ball hocked at his head. A group of ten took him and took his skateboard. They'd come and take everything. Scary. All these groups of people, and one could converge on you. They'd go at you with cleavers or meat-hooks. This was usually at night.

The orientals are the big problem in Vancouver. They call Vancouver little Hollywood, and Toronto is called New York. The States is moving up to us. They're moving in.

If you had it to do over again, would you do it over again?

Some parts. Not the winters. Summers have all been good, but the winters have been no good for me. I remember I slept under a tree in Stanley Park. I had wet feet for a month straight. I could not dry my feet. At the end of the month, my feet were like dish-pan hands. They were so raw they hurt. They hurt so bad I could not walk. I would cringe at the thought of walking. I could only go somewhere and sit for hours. Then I found someone to take me in for a couple of days and dry some socks. It was all right at the end.

I'd be in Calgary in the dead of winter at 40 below with a wind chill of 70 below and had to find a place to sleep. I'd go find a stairwell and curl up as long as I could and try to go

to sleep. I'd get chilled and shivers would go up and down my spine.

It gave me another kind of intelligence, street intelligence.

Every night is a different story. We were cruising along Robson and we stopped at a pizza shop. They'd get fake calls and not know what to do with the left-overs. We said, "Hey, can you spare a pizza?" The guy gave us four big large pizzas, and we were fed for a day and a half.

I've been panning and someone came up and gave me a twenty dollar bill. That's pretty cool.

I was hitching out to Vancouver for my very first time. We ended up taking the wrong road and ended up in Radium instead of Golden. Then we had to go back to Golden. On the road between Radium and Golden, no-one was going to pick us up. We walked for three and a half hours. It was getting dark. Finally this guy gave us a ride. He drove us to a friend's place, and they let us stay there the night. We had breakfast in the morning, and they gave us a lift right to Golden so we could get a better place for hitch-hiking.

Another time Psycho and I were hitching through the Okanagan and some Christians picked us up. They were cool. They talked to us. They took us to their place, and they let us have showers. We'd been sweating all day in the hot sun. We crashed out in the evening. They gave us dinner and a ride to the highway in the morning.

Before, when I was on the streets, it was because I had to, but now I'm just getting out to see places. I'm still young and want to see things and explore B.C. I have no real plans.

I'm hoping to get away from drinking. I've been hurting myself from drinking. I'd black out and stagger home in the night and not even know where I was. I wouldn't remember

leaving the bar, just walking and not knowing I was walking. I need to get away from that.

I've got a few punk rock friends in Calgary, and that's all they do, go to the bar every night and get drunk.

What do you want to do with your life?

I'd like to go back to school and learn a trade. I'd rather have a trade than work in an office. Carpentry would be good. I just got back from New Brunswick doing carpentry with my uncle. That was really good.

First I'd have to get my Grade 12 or my G.E.D. Then I'd find a trade school. Probably welfare would help me do that. Then I could get a good job.

Do you have the energy to do that? Is it going to happen?

I'm not sure. If I keep smoking, maybe not. My lungs feel like they are going deeper and deeper down. They feel like they are sagging. I could run from that orange car to the other side of this building, and I'd be really panting. I'll see how that goes for now. I don't know if my lungs are going to be ample enough to do anything after the summer.

I'd like to do something this winter. Summer is traveling time and winter is good for school.

- end Chapter Eleven -

Table of Contents

Chapter Twelve

Psycho

“Being Strong”

Over a picnic table by the deli

I was on the streets on and off since I was fourteen, and I've been on my own since fifteen. I was in and out of the house for a while, and then my parents and I slowly worked ourselves apart. At that age, I thought it was a lot of fun. When you're fourteen, you don't have too many cares in the world. You can do things on your own and go your own way.

The first time I really took off from home, my mom and I got into a really big argument. Where I lived in Calgary, we were a kilometre from the train tracks. I took off and hopped on the train and went to Golden.

When a train is coming into town, they slow down and stop to get clearance. I knew this because as a kid I used to watch the trains all the time. I knew the patterns. When the train stopped, I hopped on, and away I went. I spent about a day and a half on the train. It was a slow ride, but at that age it was a neat experience, hopping on a freight train just like the hobos do in the movies.

Why did you go to Golden?

I was cold on the train, and I decided it was time to get off. I hopped off the train and hung around for about a week, just bumming around the town. I met a few of the local kids and hung out with them. I told them my story, and they thought it was neat. A couple of weeks later, I hopped on the train going back home.

I got home, and my mom was really happy to see me. I was happy to be home. But after a week or so, it was back to the same old thing again. We weren't getting along too well, and I decided it was time to leave again.

I never went through much violence on the streets. It was more emotional. My parents are very straight. My mom doesn't drink very much. My dad has the occasional beer at home. Neither of my parents smoke. They are at one end of the scale, and I find myself at the other end. My parents are hard working, middle class people. Not that I'm not a hard worker, but I don't agree with society and middle class/lower class. I think everyone should be the same. I don't think that anybody is better than anybody else.

I had a hard time putting up with it. I found school very boring. I got my grade eleven and quit school. School was a very strange thing for a teenager to deal with as well as adolescence.

In society's eyes, the average street child who is wandering around all the time, doing nothing, is just a nuisance on the street. I find that a lot of people look at you like you are the litter that is on the street, just like every other piece of garbage on the street. You get a lot of working class people that just shun you and cut you down when they see you. They call you a bum and lazy.

I've panhandled and had a lot of people say, "Why don't you get a job?" It's hard when you're living on the streets to get a job. You can't stay clean. You can't wash your clothes. You can't look neat. A big thing in having a job is appearance. It's just about impossible for somebody on the streets to keep that appearance up, keep clothes clean and tidy. I kept as clean as I could, but even then I was dirty and didn't suit up to what everybody wanted.

In Vancouver, I'd crawl into a corner under a bridge. I'd sleep under a big tree, where the rain can't get you, sleeping down on the ground in the dirt. I'd go to a building site and grab a tarp and roll that around my sleeping bag. I definitely stayed dry. I hitch-hiked a lot when I was younger and camped by the side of the road, winter or summer. I was always prepared.

I found the streets to be easy. I am active all the time. I am very good at sustaining myself in the wilderness. I can find my own food. I can hunt my own food. I can survive pretty well. I always found it pretty easy on the streets, and I had a good time.

There are times, when sleeping in concrete stairwells, that you wake up in the morning stiff because you are sleeping on cold cement. That's not pleasant. You might be woken up by somebody and told to get out in the cold. It's minus twenty outside. It's two o'clock in the morning. There are a lot of people who will willingly shoo you out. It's not right for you to be sleeping alone in a stairwell. You should be home with your parents. That's what a lot of people think, unfortunately.

What did you see on the streets?

I saw a lot of people that were really depressed, a lot of despair. I met people that were happy on the streets. They were happy to be out of the house. They might have been beaten at home, or they weren't treated very nice. Their parents were very angry people. They found it easier to be on the streets. They didn't enjoy being beaten every day. If somebody is happy to be on the streets, because they are away from their parents who are beating them, that's excellent.

There are a lot of different types of people on the streets, ranging from upper class children to children whose parents

can't afford to keep them around. They can't afford to feed them, so they have to leave. Those kind of people are stronger on the streets. They are already used to not having everything. They aren't accustomed to having all the toys that most children grow up with.

I was fortunate when I was a child that I got most of the things I wanted, all the toys, the legos, a pogo stick, a skate-board. Now that I look back, I can see that my parents were right in many ways, and I am happy that they did what they did. I am definitely not upset that they kicked me out of the house. It's built my character. It's helped me out in my life that I didn't stay at home. I'm twenty-one now, and some of my friends are still at home.

I find that a lot of the upper class kids that come onto the streets stay there for the short term. They usually come on the streets in the summer and by winter they've made up with their parents, and they go back home.

On the streets in Vancouver, they are called the "summer punks." Basically, it's like a holiday for them. They come out and enjoy themselves for two or three months, but by the end of the summer, they are really tired of it and they don't want to be there anymore. I'm sure that all of the people on the streets really don't want to be there. In society today, unfortunately, somebody is going to be there. That's the way it is.

I think that destiny is going to happen. You can't change it. There is no way you can get around it. If something happens, it happens for a reason, and that's the way it is. Everybody that's been on the streets develops a tough edge. There's a barrier that goes up. People seem to hold back in an environment where they are safe.

There are a lot of people who wander around and beat you up because they don't like the look of you. You might have

something on your feet that they want. A pair of boots or a jacket, and they will take it from you whether you like it or not. Some of them will get drunk and beat you up. It's a really tough life, but there are a lot of people who thrive on it and get a natural high from it. I'm one of those people.

My parents would ask me when I was on the streets, "What are you doing? Why don't you get a job? Why don't you get an apartment? Why don't you work things out? You could come and live at home." I told my mom that I enjoyed living on the streets. She was really shocked and surprised that I was enjoying myself. My folks had the wrong conception of people on the streets and what the life is like. They think it's the worst thing that could happen. I don't think it is. I think there are a lot worse things that could happen to people.

It sounds like your street experiences were a contribution to you.

To me, yes. I learned a lot from the streets. I didn't learn very much in school other than to read or write. Basically everything I know I learned from everyday life, doing what I do. I'm mechanical. I learned that when I was a child, picking things up and taking them apart. I learned a lot about other people when I lived on the streets. It's a matter of experience. It's not what somebody can teach you. It's what you can learn yourself. You've got to get out there and do whatever you believe in.

One of the words I could use is 'exhilarating'. I've had no thoughts of suicide. I live every day as it is, one day at a time. Every day pulls me through. I just keep on going. I don't plan on stopping. I may pause for a while, but I don't plan on stopping at all.

I've had experiences where people have come up to me on the street and tried to take me in. When you're living on the

streets, you're quite willing to stay at somebody's house for a few days. These people can be overwhelming.

I've had people from church groups take me in and try to push me, in a nice way, to what they want me to be. It seems like it is to make them happy, not to make me happy. As soon as I feel that, I back off, straighten up and walk away. I'll find something else. I'll find a paper bin or a big tree. I feel comfortable when I am under a tree or in the middle of a field wrapped up in a sleeping bag and a tarp.

I feel an openness with the rest of the world. I feel like I'm communicating with anything and everything all at once. It really opens my feelings right up, and they float away. I can't get that when I am in an apartment in the city. I can't get it when I am working inside at a job all the time. I can only get that when I am free on the streets. I can be relaxed and do what I want when I want. It's not a fixed routine every day. When you're working nine-to-five, you're in a routine. You get up and brush your teeth. You go downstairs and have your morning coffee. You drive to work and work all day. You have lunch. You come home to the wife and kids. It's the same old thing everyday. I can't run my life that way. It runs against my grain.

I'm just like the tree. As long as I go the right way with the tree, I'm going to get along with it. Go the wrong way and there will be a lot of problems.

I am very strong. There are some areas where I need help, but overall, I find myself a very strong person coming off the streets. I have self-esteem and self-confidence. A lot people think it's an easy life, but you have to work for your food. You may have to walk ten miles for a meal, and that's a long way to walk when you are really hungry. Some people say it's an easy life when you get free food, but it's never free. Some way or another you have to work for it. You might have to wait around for four hours, or walk to it or help

someone out. Even panhandling is a mental strain. I don't like doing it, but when I have to do it, I do it. I panhandle for the money I need, and then I am on my way.

You can collect cans. I am not a rich person. I don't care for a lot of money. I just barely scrape by, but I'm really happy. If it wasn't for the streets, I don't think I'd be out here on the islands. I think I'd still be in Calgary. I'd be in university, or I'd be working at a job. I definitely wouldn't be enjoying myself out here. I'd be a lot different person if I hadn't gone through the streets.

I found some close friends on the streets. I have two really close friends that I consider to be my brothers. That's the way I treat them, and that's the way they treat me. There's a special bond. We skateboard together. We call ourselves The Pirates, three of us. When the three of us are together, I have the utmost fun that I think I could ever have. We really get along. There's no clash. There's no arguments. There's times when we disagree on things, but we work it out quickly. We figure out what we're going to do and we go do it. I wouldn't have that if I had stayed at home. I'd have different kinds of friends. These guys are something really special to me.

I met a lot of down to earth and honest people on the streets. They may be dishonest to society, but they are honest to themselves and their friends, when they're sober. That's a key word, sober. A lot of people on the streets, when they drink, seem to get really violent. But when they're sober, they're really good people. Alcohol and certain drugs really bring out the worst in a lot of people. It's unfortunate, but being on the streets, they are really close to that atmosphere. There are a lot of good people who get hurt from that.

It's a strange life. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, but if somebody wanted to try it, I'd certainly say, "Go ahead and try it." I wouldn't try and scare anybody away from it.

What risks do they run?

It depends what circle they join. Sometimes they would risk their life. Sometimes they would lose personal items. People would lose money. A lot of people wouldn't know how to handle that. If they don't have money, they wouldn't know what to do.

If you have a good imagination and you are fairly healthy, if you hit the streets, you're going to have a really good time. I did. I've got a really good imagination, but it's only for that area it seems. I'm not a very good artist. I'm not a very good writer or a poet, but when it comes to doing things on the streets, I have a really good time. I never seem to be bored. There is the odd time where there is nothing to do, and I just sit around. I wander all night, but more often than not, I'm really busy doing something. I have my skateboard under my feet, and cruising around town occupying my mind, and keeping myself out of trouble.

People on the streets keep together. They party together. They party in the bushes. They party in the forest. They party everywhere they can and keep themselves out of trouble rather than in trouble. They may be drinking and a little loud, but they are doing their thing off by themselves, and they're not hurting anybody. Somebody might walk by and hear them being really loud and complain to the police. That's when people think they're causing trouble. The police come up. They break them up. They're drinking in public. They get fined for it.

A lot of people can't pay those fines. They go to jail. People will say, "Oh, you've been to jail. You must be a trouble causer."

I've done some jail time. It's not pleasant. I learned my lesson. I learned that it's not right to steal from somebody else. At the time, it was out of desperation. I was out of money and couldn't get any food, and the first thing I would see was easy money.

What happened the first time you stole something?

The first time I stole something was from peer pressure. I had friends say to me that I owed them money, and I didn't have any money. So they made me go and steal cigarettes. I don't even smoke, and I went and stole cigarettes. That's how I got caught. I was really nervous. It really showed. The guy who caught me said, "You were pretty easy to pick out when you walked in the store. We figured what you were doing, and we followed you around, and we got ya." I spent a couple of days in jail. It didn't seem so bad.

In really hard times in Calgary in the winter, we'd break into motor homes and sleep inside. People would see foot tracks in the snow and they'd call the police, and we'd get charged for break and enter. It wasn't like we were trashing the motor home. All we wanted was a place to sleep. Some people would understand, but most wouldn't.

I learned my lessons. I don't like to steal from people. I don't feel good about it. It really ties my stomach in knots when I have done it. Really uncomfortable. It's a learning experience.

What advice would you give someone living on the streets?

Try not to hang out in a deep downtown area. The police see you all the time. They get to know who you are. They hassle you. It makes life really tough to be watched all the time. It's unnerving. There's always somebody's eyes watching you.

Try and keep yourself invisible. Watch what goes on. Sit on the sidelines and watch from the bench. See what happens. Keep a level head. Don't go out there and get too wasted. Go and have a good time and party, but don't get so drunk that you pass out and don't know what is happening. You don't know where you are going to wake up or if you're going to wake up. Always keep some part of your mind clear so you know what's going on.

I seldom drink. I have three or four beers now and then. I don't drink hard alcohol. That helps me keep my head clear. I smoke a bit of pot. I don't overdose on that either. I get really sick if I do that. I've seen people get really drunk and pass out on a street corner, and people walk up to them and take things out of their pockets and take things off their bodies, like their clothes. They would take their shoes, take their jackets and walk away. There's nothing you can do about it. If it's cold enough, you can wake up with frostbite, or you're going to wake up really sore because somebody has beaten you up. You wake up, and your ribs are hurting, and you don't know why your ribs are hurting. You were too drunk the night before.

Have a good time and learn what you learn, but do it with a level head. Life is a party, but do it right or you're not going to have a very long life.

I had a good friend who shot himself in the head with a bow and arrow. He was really depressed, and he was drunk when he did it. Depression and alcohol don't mix. He was a good guy. We got along really well. He came out here to visit a few times. I was really surprised to hear what happened.

When I was younger, I didn't think about what I was doing. I just did it. Luckily for me I got away without being hurt. There are a few cuts and scrapes that I could have avoided if I wanted to. I've been fortunate to come out unscathed.

You have to feel strong before you can be strong. You have to help yourself. It's got to come from inside. It's something you have to build from yourself. You have to know where your limits are, where the edge is. Look across to the other side, and build your bridge from one side to the other, without falling.

- end Chapter Twelve -

Table of Contents

Chapter Thirteen

Sonia

“No More Abuse”

Sitting in the clover

How old were you when you went to the streets?

Fourteen.

How old are you now?

Twenty-four.

Have you been on the streets all this time?

No. I've had times when I've moved back home. I grew up around Toronto.

What put you on the streets?

Dissatisfaction with where and how I was living. I lived in suburbia and grew up there. I didn't feel really accepted at home, so I split. It wasn't a really cataclysmic event. It was boredom.

Tell me about the day you left.

I just picked up and left.

What did you have with you?

A change of clothes and my diary. I split and went to downtown Toronto and met up with people I had known

from where I lived. They left long before I did. They were older than I was.

What was downtown like?

It was scary. I felt frightened of the situation but was feeling calm at the same time. I was bogged down by my situation at home. It was good to be somewhere where no-one really cared, no-one knew you. I was anonymous. No-one would try to get into my mind and say, "What's going on?"

There were a lot of drugs around. It was a real eye opener. I had led a pretty sheltered life up to that point.

What did you see when your eyes were opened?

A lot of people in the same situation I was in, trying to hide from something. Everyone had something they wanted to get away from.

What did I see? Reality, I guess. I knew that the kind of life I had been living was a smoke screen with props. It didn't seem that there was anything behind it, or at least there was something behind it, but it wasn't real. It was a painted picture. When you leave that behind and go to the streets, there is a lot you see that you don't like, but at least you know it's real. It's not like someone's ideal picture of how life should be. It's how life is.

How does life as it is differ from the pictures you had been presented?

Everyone has to take care of themselves. There is really only yourself and you have to take care of yourself, because nobody will take care of you. Yet because of the way people live on the streets, there is cooperation between everyone. You have to take care of yourself, but people do take care of each other and watch each other's backs. That was cool.

Was it threatening?

Yea. You have to be really careful. You don't know what the person wants from you. There's always the question, "This person is helping me out. What does he want?" I'd like to believe in people, but you have to keep in the back of your mind a question about people's motives. What's behind what they are saying?

What might you be suspicious of?

Usually it's connected to sex in some way. Every single time it's like someone who wants to get you wired on drugs so you'll be owing to them, so they can put your butt on the streets.

Did that happen to you?

No. I was pretty lucky that way. I never really got into hard drugs. I got by easily by panhandling and feeding myself that way. But I know a lot of people that it did happen to. Once you're into more expensive tastes, you have to support that somehow.

When I lived in Toronto, I was more obsessed with alcohol. I was really into numbing myself. I wanted to fade into the woodwork.

Why did you have to numb yourself?

Because emotionally, when I look at the way things are, I don't like it. It hurts to look at the world and see the way everyone is. Looking at people like they are commodities instead of relating to them as human beings. Looking at people who are worrying about their next hit of coke. They'd do anything for it. To see that, and to see my friends become that, was hard. I got heavily into booze so I wouldn't even have to notice.

But you saw it anyway.

Yes. But there's nothing you can do about it. It's how they numb themselves. How can I tell them not to numb themselves like that, when I'm numbing myself differently? I don't have the right. Alcohol can turn you just as ugly as any other drug.

Where did you stay?

For the first while I slept on benches and then hooked up with people who gave me places to stay. Crashing in pads. I escaped being raped a couple of times. I was too trusting. I was of the mind that a person was helping me and then realizing that he wasn't, figuring that anyone who was living on the street would be happy to fuck for a bed and a roof. It's a mind set I don't understand.

I stayed in squats and down at the market. There was a warehouse packed full of people, dirty. People just crashed on the floor. Everyone kept to themselves a lot.

What's it like to dig back into this?

It's strange. It's part of my life I left behind a long time ago. Talking to you now, it's coming back fully. But it seems like a lot of it is something I haven't thought of in such a long time that I can scarcely remember it or scarcely describe it. Even when I was living it, I was so not there. My mind was somewhere else so much of the time. Maybe I didn't observe what was around me, or maybe I conveniently forgot.

I can see how a lot of people go crazy just by experiencing it, by opening their eyes and looking at it. There are a lot of people that lose their minds there. They are just not there anymore.

What would you like people to know about the streets?

It's not something that just happens to people who are degenerate. I think a lot of people have this idea that it just doesn't happen to normal, healthy young people. It happens to kids that already have something wrong with them. It can happen to anyone. No-one is immune to living the way street people live, having to beg for your next meal. It's not like any person is different.

These are people who have rejected the whole structure. Society is not for the people anymore. It's for the corporations. People who live on the street have rejected that. They have made the decision not to buy into that system.

People walk by you and pretend you're not even there, and you're trying to bum money for food. They really think, "That'll never happen to me. You're just a bum, and you don't care about working for your living." They figure that they are better than you are, that they have clued into something that you haven't clued into. But they are not immune to it. It could just as easily be them.

I'd really like people to realize that the way our society is set up is so that there will always be people on the lowest rung. It's not as if it is the fault of the people who are there. They are there because it is set up so there will be a large number of poor people so there can be a few rich people at the top. There's no sense in denying that. I think a lot of people do deny that. They look at the scene, people bumming money or shooting up on Hastings, and they think that these people don't want a better life.

A lot of people are numbed into that existence. It's more like a cage than anything else. Once you get in you can't see your way out of it.

Tell me about a day in the cage.

I can tell you about Toronto. I'd wake up at someone's house or apartment downtown about three in the afternoon. Surface out. I didn't see much daylight. I didn't really want to. I'd go out and start panning money for food or alcohol or drugs. I'd walk downtown, choose the richest areas where all the suits hung out.

I used to go down to the bus station a lot and say I was five bucks short for a train ticket somewhere and pan up maybe fifty bucks in an hour. It was different when I was younger, and I could pass for a school girl stuck in a big city by herself.

Then I'd meet up with some friends and go out and party. It all sounds so vague, but it was a really vague existence.

Do you remember what was happening inside of yourself?

I was totally isolated and in denial of a lot of pain. It was the pain of not really being listened to or valued. I withdrew totally. Outwardly, I was a social person. But that's not how I was feeling inside. Inside I was totally worried about rejection. I was really emotionally unstable at the time. I didn't really value myself very highly at all.

Did the pain just wear away?

I don't think it just wore away. It was more like realizing that regardless of whatever, I was still living. I was still eating. I was okay. I was existing. I realized that if I could exist through it then I could survive it and not feel so lost and so hateful towards the world, towards people around me.

At least I lived through a lot of abuse I received as a child. Realizing that helped me to say, "So I'm alive, whether I want to be or not." It helped to deal with it. It helped me say, "Since I'm alive, I may as well let go of some of the anger. I don't want to be an angry, sour person for the rest

of my life." There are times I would rather have been dead, so I wouldn't have had to deal with it.

Meeting up with other young people who had similar experiences was a big help. It's hard to believe, but you really do think you're the only one that has ever gone through any of that shit. Then you meet a bunch of people who have gone through the same thing, and then it opens up your eyes. "Okay, so this isn't because I was born defective, and therefore I was abused." We're all born the same way, and people flip out and abuse their children or ignore them. It helped a lot to realize that everyone I had been in contact with had been through experiences very similar to my own.

I was sexually abused when I was really young, not by my parents, by family friends. My parents were in denial about that, in apathy, or just not wanting to look at it. The major grudge that I held against them at that time was, "How could you live in the same house while this was happening and not care."

But meeting up with other people who had been through that, and realizing that we all lived through it, really made me wake up and say, "Since I'm still alive, I have the power to sort it out .. somehow to put it all into place in my mind."

LSD helped a lot actually. It's one of those things that helped a lot. I'd do acid and sit there and think until I had a lot of these loose ends all sorted into a spot in my brain. Maybe it didn't rectify anything, but it helped me put together a philosophy, a reason. Whether the reason was valid or not doesn't matter. In my mind it seemed to be sorted out. That helped a lot.

Would you tell me about the sexual abuse?

The baby-sitter came over and was really slimy. He lived across the street. My parents knew his parents. He was a

very sick individual. He would touch me and make me feel total dirt. He would distract my brother, who was older than me. He had all these National Geographics. He'd have my brother looking at the African women's boobs and take me upstairs and touch me in various ways. I used to keep giving him my dolls to play with.

"Do that to her. Leave me alone!"

I knew it wasn't right, but there was something that stopped me from saying anything. I didn't think they would believe me. I thought they would judge me for it. I sensed, even at that age, that they wouldn't be able to deal with it. They were really emotionally absent parents.

When I finally did tell my mom, I was a lot older, sixteen. It was still too harsh for her to handle.

She said, "Oh well, I never really trusted him."

Well, that's good. "Good thing you left your three year old daughter with him."

They were just so vacant. Then there was another friend of my parents who was pretty twisted too. He'd play games with us. It was the same with the baby-sitter. He'd start playing games and then start grabbing me somewhere. It's been a long time since I thought about that.

It really freaked me. I didn't let anyone near me when I left home. I didn't have sex with anyone for a long time. A lot of people become empty and vacate. They are able to go out and start making money that way. But for me it was such a horrifying thing, I didn't want to experience sex at all.

Have you let go of that now?

Mmm Hmmm. The last time that I moved back home for a year, I went back to school for a short period of time. I went through a rape, and that was the turning point.

You were raped?

That happened when I was eighteen. I think that's when a lot of things started to fall into place. Patterns and the abuse I suffered as a child came back up. And again, my mom was totally vacant. I told her shortly after it happened, what happened. She was so vacant that I realized that was it and I was totally on my own. I guess part of me hoped that when I told her of my abuse as a child that there would be some support there. I was holding off waiting for that to happen. But when it didn't when it was right in her face, it was like, "Okay, this is my shit, and I have to sort through it by myself. There's no hope of any help from her."

I've let go of a lot of the feelings now.

My relationship with my father has changed a lot. There was a lot of fear I had for him. I had to let go of that too.

Was he supportive?

Oh no. He didn't even know. He was probably even more vacant than my mother is. I realized that a lot of the tension and the hatred I felt for him, I was feeling for my attackers and my baby-sitter. A lot of the attention was aimed at him because he was male. There is still a real strain between me and him. But I have realized that I have had to let go of a lot of the stuff I was inventing on him. He was totally absent. I don't think he even noticed.

So the problem began to dissolve when you were raped?

Well, not right then, but shortly afterwards. It didn't just dissolve. It had come to a point where I had to become emotionally responsible for myself. I had to really embrace

myself. It sounds weird, but it was a really freeing thing. It was a horrible experience, but it was probably the thing that freed me.

It was like saying, "If I can get over this shit, I can get over any shit." It was such a lonely thing that I had to do myself. I stopped blaming myself. I stopped doubting my own healthy sexuality. I stopped doubting my own beauty. I realized that the abuse was so sick and so wrong that it couldn't have been because of me.

Before the rape, there was part of me that still did think that at three years old, there was something wrong with me. I hadn't worked through the fact that I was blaming myself. Logically, I can look at it and say, "Of course, it wasn't my fault." But I didn't really deal with the emotional part of me that was saying, "I was a bad kid, and I had drawn it." It forced me to deal with a lot of issues. It forced me to build up my own self-esteem and be supportive to myself, because there really wasn't anyone who would help me go through that.

I also went into a rape crisis centre in Toronto and talked to people. That helped a lot. It was a big turning point.

Did the numbness you were feeling on the streets begin to clarify?

Yea, to a certain extent. The numbness was there when I wanted it to be. I used it as a tool after that. I had control over it. When I was younger, I felt so numb, and I couldn't warm up. I couldn't get out. Later, when I wanted to be numb and put a barrier between me and something, it was there. I didn't have to be like that with everyone. I didn't have to be like that twenty- four hours a day.

I guess I really took control over my internal head-space at that point. This is mine. I wasn't going to feel down, if I didn't want to feel down. I hadn't taken control of myself

before that. I hadn't empowered myself before that. I said, "Okay, I can go wherever I want and take care of myself."

Did you get support from any other people?

My peers. Most everyone I knew, even in high school, had gone through something like that. It was a big thing. Of thirty people, that I could honestly say were good friends of mine, that I saw every day, twenty-two to twenty-five of them had gone through something like that before they were five.

This was white picket fence land, where everything was beautiful?

- end Chapter Thirteen -

Table of Contents

Chapter Fourteen

Mike

“Hooked”

Near the Community Hall

How old are you?

Seventeen.

And how old were you when you went to the streets?

Thirteen.

How did it happen that you went to the streets?

It was in Winnipeg, my home town. I'd already been kicked out of my mom's place. That was when I was twelve. My mother's boyfriend was a real jerk. In any case I moved into my dad's. His girlfriend wasn't on very good terms with me. She had put a lock on her door of her room. This offended me in a really large way. I was already an alcoholic at that point, and I had been drinking one day. I kicked open the door and took a bunch of money that was inside. So I got kicked out. This was perfectly just. I deserved it.

This was late fall. For about a week, I was sleeping in a park where I used to party all the time. I slept by a fire. It was cold, but I wasn't doing that bad. When it was too cold to sleep outside, I'd sit in the donut shop all night and bum coffee. I knew someone who worked there.

Then I went and lived with a friend for a couple of months. Then I started sleeping outside again. I didn't think to find a

squat, being only thirteen. I went and slept in the same park again. Then after about a month, I moved in with my dealer. This was probably not one of the best things I've done.

Why?

He was my pot and acid dealer, and he had a lot of coke. He gave me a lot of it for free, so I got hooked on that. I lived with him for about two months. I knew that once I moved out, I wouldn't be able to get free coke anymore. I locked myself in a room and told my friends to keep me in there and not let me out, so I wouldn't do any coke.

How was it being locked in that room?

Boring. There was music at least. There was no TV. It was a real drag actually. I found myself in a great need of this drug that I knew I didn't need really.

How did you feel physically?

I felt like shit. I really just felt horrible. I felt like if I didn't get some cocaine soon then I was just going to crumble up and die. But I stayed in there, and they fed me. They brought me food, and they didn't let me do any more coke.

How long did you stay in there?

Three or four days.

Did that do the job?

Pretty much. After that I left the house, and I was still very hurt. It wasn't around any more, and the temptation wasn't there.

Then I moved back to my previous friend's place. I was there for almost half a year. Then I was put into foster care. That family couldn't support me anymore. I was in foster care for another six months. Then I got sick of foster care

and came to Vancouver. I decided I would be better off on my own. When I left Winnipeg, I was an alcoholic. I felt I was too old to be trapped in Winnipeg ... at fourteen or fifteen.

How did you get to Vancouver?

My friend knew a person whose father worked for CN Rail. He got free tickets, and he sold them. We were supposed to pay \$100 for each ticket, but we only ended up paying \$30. I spent most of my time in the bar car.

The first night I got here I met a guy named Bob. He gave me acid, and so I spent my first night in Vancouver tripping around. The first night I crashed in a hotel room with some of Bob's friends. There were already seven people staying in a ten by ten foot room, which wasn't very comfortable. I stayed there for a week.

Then I met a guy in Whalley and stayed there for a while. Then I started squatting. My first squat was on Hamilton Street. It was a vacant apartment building. There were only four suites. It was like a huge house. That was a really nice squat. No running water or heat or electricity. We lived there for months. It kinda gets blurry, with all the drugs I was doing.

Had you abandoned coke?

Completely. Mostly I was just doing acid and pot and stuff like that. Nothing really hard. After that I went to the building next door. The one I was in got completely trashed because there were too many people who knew about it. This pee'd me off. Too many people find out about a place, and the place gets destroyed.

I made friends with George and Tom. Tom had just cracked a bank near Hastings. It was abandoned as well. We moved into the bank, and I lived there for many months. There was

asbestos in that place, just in the basement though. We told everyone that the whole place had asbestos. That way eight billion people wouldn't show up and trash the place like what happened to our previous squat. It ended up with only about five of us staying in this huge four story building. It was great. It was really quite nice. I liked that spot a lot. It's still around too. A really neat building.

How did you pass the time?

Mostly panhandling. Just sitting around waiting for my next meal. I wasn't eating very much, and I wasn't in very good health either. I was surviving anyway.

How did you feel about yourself?

I didn't really think about it very much. I didn't have time to think of who I was because I was spending all my concentration on surviving and getting my next meal. At that point I was just who I was, and I didn't really think about it. But I was still young. I still am.

At that point I started doing harder drugs. I was dabbling in PCP's which people were trying to pass off as mescaline. But it's not.

Then I finally got on welfare after being in Van for quite some time. I got my first hotel room on the welfare cheque. That was a horrible hotel. Totally infested. It had a fridge at least, which is more than I can say for most of the hotels around.

Hanging out on Granville was a horrible thing, which I pretty well had to do for most of the time. Sometimes I could panhandle on Davie. The bar rush there was just excellent for money. Panhandling there was really good. Not any more, but it was at the time. Too many people there now.

Panhandling is totally shot in downtown Vancouver. There's too many people. A lot of the kids from the suburbs. They have places to live, but they'll panhandle because they think it's the cool thing to do. But it screws up a lot of the street people definitely.

Who really need the money.

Mm Hmm. After a while people stop giving panhandlers money because there are so many. People with good hearts can't give all their money away.

Then I came here, last year.

Why was life on Granville horrible?

It's just a really crappy place. In Winnipeg, I spent most of my time as a recluse, drinking. I didn't go and hang out downtown, and I'm not the kind of person who gets into mass social situations. I prefer a few people. Being on Granville, surrounded by all these people, kids from the suburbs and drug dealers, got really disgusting.

There were a lot of yuppies and business people who were not very nice at all, especially when asked for spare change. Very rude people.

There's the main strip, Granville. All businesses, like an outside mall. Malls really suck to begin with. So there I was, every day in this mall, begging. There's people everywhere. Drugs everywhere, being offered to everyone. Needless to say, I'm glad I'm not there now.

In any case, I came here and stayed here for five months. I stayed outside my friend's cabin for a while in a tent, getting welfare and then I left because I couldn't find a place. I wanted very much to find a cabin here, but I couldn't do it.

I had my first run in with heroin here. It had come from Courtenay. So when I went back to Vancouver, I was on heroin.

How did you get into heroin?

A friend of mine, who had come from Toronto, liked heroin a lot. He was doing heroin, and I asked him if I could try it. I'd done coke, but I'd never done heroin before. I bought a little bit, and I did it. The next day I did a little more. He still owes me \$80. I bought a point, and he was supposed to pay me the following day. We were supposed to go to Mexico when I went back to Vancouver. He went to Mexico. I had left my ID here when I went back to Vancouver, so I didn't go to Mexico.

So I was in Vancouver again, doing heroin this time, instead of cocaine in Winnipeg.

What did heroin do for you?

It was a great rush. It definitely was a very good drug. Very addictive. I did it for three months on and off. I wasn't doing it every day. I couldn't afford to eat, as it was. I quit for a few months and then started up again right around New Year's. Then I quit again, and I've been off it for three months.

You are the first person that has said that he has done heroin. I am very interested to know what the experience is for you. Why you do it. How you feel when you do it?

It's an immense feeling of ultimate relaxation. I was doing it in the needle. I shouldn't have done that. The first time I did heroin, I banged it with the needle. After doing it like that the first time, I could never again do it another way. That's the best way of doing it. In any case, being on it is like drifting, kind of floating. Very interesting. It's very nice.

Are you clear of what is going on around you?

Not altogether. Just the same, you are aware of your surroundings and what's going on around you, vaguely. But not completely. Usually you're nodding off. You close your eyes and drift for a while. Open your eyes a while later. It's not like acid. It doesn't do anything to your mind. You still have complete conscious control. It makes your body laid out pretty much. A very nice thing and very addictive.

There's lots of people, even as we speak, that I know are doing it, much more than they should.

I hear that heroin is very pure now on Vancouver streets.

Definitely. It's too pure. I don't know how that's coming to be. It's getting more and more pure all the time, and people are dying from it. A lot of people.

Does that frighten you?

Yea. I have a lot of friends who are on it. I have one or two friends in particular who wouldn't be doing it now if it wasn't for me. They wanted to try it. I had the means, and I knew how. They ended up doing it for the first time with me, and now they're hard core junkies, and I'm off. I feel responsible for that. So yea, it does scare me. It's too pure for sure.

How long does the hit last?

Hours, depending on the size of it. There's ten points in a gram. When I first started doing it, I was doing quarter point hits. That isn't very much. By the time I stopped, I was still only doing third point and half point hits. That was getting me off for anywhere from two to four hours.

Then when you come down, what does it feel like?

It's not hard to come down because it's so mellow the whole way. When you come down, you're just not high anymore. It's not anything special coming down off heroin. Generally I was doing it late at night. I'd do my hit about three in the morning. I wasn't doing it in the day that much. I was just doing it at night at my friend's house where I was staying. I'd just go to sleep afterwards.

I was never doing it enough that I could get sick. People who are doing it every day and stop, get sick, physically sick. It is a physical addiction and a mental addiction, just because it's so good. People who I know who have tried to quit, get really ill. I've never had to go through someone withdrawing from it. I've been told that it's not very pleasant. All the better I wasn't doing it constantly.

Do you intend to do it again?

No. I'd like to do it again and I think that's the reason that I shouldn't do it again. I don't think I will. If I do, it won't be through the needle. A lot of people I know are addicted to the needle. When I first got off heroin, I was still banging actafeds.

What's that?

It has codeine in it. I know that. It's for when you have the flu. It makes you drowsy. That's what I was hitting up. Then I stopped doing that. I trashed all my needles. I was still doing PCP's, but I figured I'd rather be on that than on heroin.

So you said there was an addiction to the needle.

Yes. It's just the rush. When you hit up, it's like instant. A second after you've pushed the plunger all the way in, you're high. It's very addicting for sure. That's what people are addicted to more than the drugs. Not a good thing at all.

But I'm off that, and I'm here.

Now what?

Now I have to get back on welfare and hopefully find a place. That's what I wanted to do last year. I'll attempt it yet again, and this time I'll stay until the fall until the summer people are gone. Hopefully, I'll live my life out happily.

Living happily. What does that look like?

Working. Having a place of my own. Eating regularly. That to me is like happiness. Some good friends. As little alcohol as possible. I find that the more alcohol I drink, the more I want more. Alcohol is another evil thing, I think.

Happiness would be being somewhere like here, where there's not too many people, not too many hassles. Hassles in the city, like the police. I was always getting jacked up. It's a real drag. That's for sure.

My plans for the future are to buy some land. I want to work a year or two and put money aside and buy a few acres up in the mountains. I have a few friends who would like to move up there with me and maybe start some sort of a commune. Like a tribe. That to me would be happiness.

What happens in that kind of a social scene that intrigues you?

It's based on the fact that everyone in it is a friend to begin with. You know everyone that's there. Everyone has a part and is doing something. Everyone gets their turn at hunting, and there's a garden to tend to. Everyone taking their part in doing what needs to be done.

I'd like to do a lot of reading, and I like to draw. That would be another staple of my existence.

My main concern now in my life is finding some way of providing until this coming Friday. I have \$60 coming to me this Friday in the mail, but until then I'm completely screwed for food. I was going to make a trip to Courtenay, but I don't have \$2.50 to return on the ferry. I'm pretty short.

I'm hurting. But I'll survive. I've always managed to before. There's always clams on the beach.

Is there anything else you want people to know?

Stay away from heroin and needles and coke. Stay away from them. They're bad.

- end Chapter Fourteen -

Table of Contents

Chapter Fifteen

Mary

“Locked In”

In the Playground

You first went to the streets when you were twelve. Would you tell me how that happened?

Home was really small, too small for my mom and I to live in the same house together. I was brought up to be independent and think for myself, and she just wasn't letting me. It changed as soon as I hit puberty.

We used to fight all the time. We used to beat each other up. I was bigger than she was. In my room there was just enough room for me and my brother to sleep in. There was just not enough space for me.

I left. I hopped a train.

What happened the day you left?

I got an APB put out on me, and I got taken off the train in Nanaimo by the police. I spent the first year that I was away from home coming back and forth. The police would bring me back, and I would leave again the next day. When you're that young, the police are always looking for you, so you learn how to hide out in little corners, so they don't find you. You get together with all the younger people and end up finding places to hide from the police. They spot you pretty easy.

Where would you hide?

Anywhere. Trade drugs for a place to hide. Anywhere away from the public eye. Away from town instead of downtown. Go downtown at dinnertime and panhandle and find money for food. Sometimes, because we were so young, we could go to the hostels. They would take you in. Pay \$1.50 and sleep in a bed for the night, or sleep wherever.

There were lots of drugs. That's another reason I left home. I started doing drugs when I was seven.

What kinds of drugs?

Speed and all kinds of pills and alcohol and pot. No needles, but lots of drugs that couldn't be done at home. I got kicked out of school for dealing drugs when I was in grade six.

I looked the same when I was ten years old as I do now. I haven't changed any in my physical appearance at all. I was a huge kid. I made friends with older people and told them I was older than I was and traded them drugs for pot. I sold varieties of stuff to try and get money.

I was prescribed speed by the doctor when I was seven, and I just started taking it all the time. It was just totally a necessity. I was prescribed it because I supposedly had lung problems. I was fine as far as I was concerned.

I feel really badly about that whole situation now. The reason I got off the streets was that I totally overdosed on drugs and spent four days of hell. My friends wouldn't take me to the cops because they'd get caught. I was with young people, and everybody was trying to stay away from any public eye.

I spent four days locked in a room, almost dead. Totally disgusting. It was horrible. It was the worst experience of my entire life.

Were you there by choice or did they lock you in?

They locked me in because they didn't want anybody to find me. They gave me the drugs. We just took a whole bunch of drugs and got really out of it, and everybody took more drugs. I ended up having quite a bit too much drugs and overdosing.

I was pretty down then. I'm a pretty smart person. I think the streets is a pretty horrible place to live, especially when you are that young. It's really hard. It's really hard on you emotionally. It's really hard on you physically. I couldn't take it. It was too much for me at that time. Plus all the drugs. It was really draining. I was getting to the end of my tolerance level. I knew there must be some way to get out of the situation, whatever it had to be.

How did you pay for the drugs?

I was prescribed them. I could go to a clinic, and they'd give me big balls of speed and liquid speed. I could go to a different clinic and they'd give me more. I could trade them for whatever. Sell them. I sold a lot of drugs.

Is that how you paid for food?

I don't eat that much food so it wasn't that big of a deal. I could fast for a week, and I'd be fine. I'd just decide I was fasting. "I don't want to look for food today."

There was a place that would let me dishwash for half an hour for my lunch. I found a friend. He was really cool about that. He let a lot of us younger people do that.

Where would you sleep?

I slept in all kinds of places. In the bushes. I tried to stay away from downtown. I'd go downtown and get enough money and then stay away from downtown. That was ten years ago. I could walk to Kitsilano from downtown Vancouver and sleep in the park, and I wouldn't get kicked

out. Find a tree. Pretty wet. Not very nice. Find a piece of plastic. Sleep in a garbage bag. You learn how to do it.

It's hard for me to remember it. I blocked a lot of it out. I took so many drugs that half of it doesn't seem real. I don't know if it happened.

Can you tell me about other people on the street. What did you see besides yourself?

I was pretty consumed in myself. I got really really down on society. I didn't really connect with anybody. Other people were always getting drunk. There were a few of us, and we'd look out for each other, watch each other's backs because we were younger. There was safety in numbers. We knew each other, and we'd hang out together. Sometimes we'd sleep together, but we wouldn't always sleep together. Lots of people were really happy, and lots of people really liked it. I didn't like it.

I had to deal with older men trying to pick up a twelve year old kid on the streets who doesn't even have a clue what's going on. I couldn't handle it at home. I couldn't handle fighting with my parents. I couldn't handle the situation I was in. I just wanted to do something better. I didn't want to have to fend off all these weird child molesters all the time. That was a huge huge thing.

Pretty much any night I wanted to, I could go home with some strange guy. But it's not my trip. It's really weird.

Tell me about these men, what they looked like, how they approached you?

They were all different. Some guys would come and ask, "Do you want a place to sleep tonight?" Some people would spend half the day staring at you. Some people would grab you. One night some guy hit me over the head with a beer bottle. I still have a scar from it. I just happened not to get

knocked out. I kicked him in the knee, and he couldn't run after me. I just went into a public place. There were lots of situations like that.

A lot of fear.

A lot of fear. I was fairly young. I definitely had a hard time dealing with the public eye, people in general. They definitely did not want to help me at all in any way. I didn't really want to be helped either. I just wanted out. If that was what life was, I definitely didn't want it. It was a pretty depressing situation.

A lot of people out there had a really good time and really enjoyed themselves, but I found it really quite a downer.

Tell me about some of the people you associated with. Were they friends?

I never really connected with anybody. I thought I had friends until the day I got locked in the room. Nobody would get me help. I'm dying in a room, and nobody is willing to sacrifice themselves for my safety. I learned that I was totally alone, and that I don't have any friends. That was the end of it.

I called my parents and said, "I need to get out of here. Can you help me with some kind of situation?" I got a job on a farm in the interior.

Everybody is out there for themselves. The survival instinct.

I don't think I really let people in either. For me it's too scary to depend on. I can only depend on myself. Especially in that kind of a situation. The concrete jungle for sure.

Were there any people who helped you?

Some people gave me money when I was panhandling. People would see me and give me twenty bucks. Sometimes street workers would come up and ask me if I wanted to come and have counseling. But I was right in the middle of it, and I was not open to talk to anybody about anything, let alone have somebody that I don't know come and pry into my life. No way.

What's it like for you doing this interview?

Very very strange. I don't talk about it ever. My way of dealing with what went on during that time was to forget it. It's gone, gone. Do something else. Just totally change. And I did. I've done a lot of things in my life. I don't think what I did there was anything productive. It was just completely and totally negative.

You went right to the bottom.

Oh yea. It was a pretty bottom situation as far as I was concerned. Anything was better. I didn't want that life style anymore. It was either jump out of it and completely change and forget it, or I'll die here. Soon. I almost did.

What was it like when you called your parents?

It was really hard. My parents totally care about me. We just know that we can't be in the same space whatsoever. We have always known that there's just too much clashing energy. I think they had a long time to think about what they'd want to say if I ever called them. They were open.

It was strange. I went home and stayed with them for a week, and I left again. I had to leave again. I went and stayed with an older friend of mine. My relationship with them got better and better and better. Then they found me a job. I worked on a farm with a whole bunch of people that came from the same situation as I did. People who didn't have that much. It was really good to be with those people

in a situation that wasn't right in the middle of it. It was really healthy for me. It totally made a big change.

I made myself enough money there to buy myself a van and come here. That was the solution. It changed everything. I wanted to go back to school too.

How do you feel about society now, and people?

I think about it with a better head. I know more about how things work. I still don't like it. I'm healthier about how I feel about changing it. I live here so I don't have to deal with it. It's better for me to be disconnected from it.

What would you like to say to people about the streets?

For me it was a really bad experience and really hard. It didn't hold anything for me. It was just nothing. I think that there are easier ways to do it, healthier ways to do it.

What's the 'it'?

Life.

- end Chapter Fifteen -

Table of Contents

Chapter Sixteen

Carve

“Brutality ... as the Child of Violence”

In the Playground

I left my parents house when I was nine and went into group homes and juvenile detention centres.

Why did that happen?

I was just too much to handle, I guess. I was into stealing, so they got rid of me.

This was in Winnipeg?

Mm Hmm. From age nine to fifteen, I went through group homes galore, at least fifteen different group homes. I'd run away. At fifteen, Child and Family Services gave me funding for rent and food, but I screwed that up. So I ended up on my own at fifteen.

Immediately after that, I moved into a house full of punks. There were about twenty different punks. It was an old, larger house, three stories, ten rooms, trashed, everybody sleeping anywhere, bottles, liquor, holes in the walls. It wasn't a squat. It was a place to rent, but it should have been a squat. That's what it seemed like. I quite enjoyed it actually.

Why?

It seemed like a fun thing to do. And I did have a lot of fun. I used to like to party a lot. Not that I don't any more. I used to party a lot harder.

What does partying hard look like?

I used to party until I was shit-faced, totally obliterated and violent. It was a violent household. Whenever it occurred, it occurred, usually every day. Fights and arguments and scraps. Going out and picking your own fights. Finding people to beat up on.

This was a time in my life when I was so hurt, I'd go out and roll people for money just so I could get beer or a drug of some sort. It was brutal at times. At fifteen, out rolling people so I can get wasted. At the time, it seemed like it was fun, but it wasn't. It wasn't right, I guess.

Once, me and a couple of friends had dropped some LSD, and we were hurting for some liquor, so we went out looking for somebody to roll. We were punks, and we were obnoxious. We found these homosexuals down by a park. We beat up on some guy. Took his watch and some jewellery and money and escorted him to the bank machine, so he could get us some more money.

That's all behind me now. I don't bother with that stuff. I don't bother with anything criminal anymore.

What's changed?

It's not worth it. Just not worth it. I'm more pleasant. I'm much happier being non-violent and being non-toxic. At the time I got a total kick out of beating up people. It was the state I was in. I was confused and drunk all the time and needing it more and more.

Me and my two buddies used to drink a mickey for breakfast and pan up enough money to get a sixty pounder at night. That's sixty ounces. Shit man, we drank a lot.

What did it do for you?

Got me drunk. Gave me a good time. We'd get drunk and have fun. Be rowdy.

Would you go back to your childhood before you started stealing? Do you ever remember a time when it was fun and okay?

No. I had a shitty childhood. It was hell. It was hell living with my parents. I never met my real father. But the first father I remember was a real alcoholic, fucking prick, asshole. He's a nice guy now. The second one raped my sister, and he went to jail. He used to beat the shit out of me like you wouldn't believe.

He made belts out of steel belted tires. He took it too far. He made a belt out of a steel belted tire, an inch thick at least, like a strap. He'd take us down in the basement, whip our pants down, pour a cup of water over our ass and fuckin' smack it. That's harsh. That's brutal.

He made me sleep in a rabbit cage for a week when I was about seven. Like a little four by four cage. He locked us in rooms with a cigarette container to shit in. Starve us for a few days.

My birthday is just before Christmas. I got money for my birthday. I went out and bought Christmas presents for everybody with it. I bought my mother a candle with the Mother Mary holding the baby Jesus. I was only seven years old. I gave it to her for Christmas. The day after my birthday, I gave it to her. I went out and bought it with the money she gave me for my birthday. She kicked the shit out of me for doing it. She thought I went and stole it. Shit man,

that's harsh. That's always stuck in my mind. That really sucked.

Do you remember the first time you went out and stole anything?

I was around seven. I was a little thief then.

What did you steal?

Everything. The real reason I left home happened when I was nine years old. My mother had a coin collection, and I stole it. I went and cashed it in for money. The next day, my dad kicked the shit out of me and went and called the group home people. That was one of the saddest days in my life.

I sat outside the group home that they put me in and cried for three days.

I wrote my mom a letter. I wasn't very good at talking to her. She didn't want to talk to me for at least two months after I went in there, so I was pretty upset. Then we began becoming friends. I was better off without my parents. Group homes did me a lot of good until I left them. Then, after I left them, I went back to hell.

I gained a lot from the streets. You gain a lot from being on your own. Being on your own and toughing it out and surviving on your own without assistance from the government.

What did you gain?

I gained a lot of respect for people. I gained survival. I'm still a survivor. I can't say I'm never going back to the streets because it's a lie. I enjoy it.

I don't enjoy the violent parts of it anymore. I enjoy being around and knowing people and being noticed. You are noticed when you are panhandling.

When I lived on the streets, there was a lot of violence. We'd drink our faces off and stand around and any fucker who looked at us wrong, we'd just go up and punch him. That's all behind me. I'm totally non-violent now.

It didn't have anything to do with being vengeful or anything. It just came out of me. That's how it came out. Maybe it was from having a shitty childhood and getting my ass kicked by my dad all the time, my mom too. I never did it because I got beat on. Maybe I did subconsciously. I dunno. Possibly. I just enjoyed doing it. It was a good time.

I look back and it wasn't so great.

Are you feeling badly about it?

I feel bad about some of the things I did. Sure. I never felt bad about doing it at the time. I look back and I think, "What the fuck was I doing? Why was I doing that? Why am I going out and beating up people that don't deserve to be beaten up and ripped off just so I can drink." It wasn't fair to them. Right now, I guess it's fair to me to feel bad about it. I should never have been doing that kind of shit.

A lot of the fault is because of my family, my past life, childhood.

How long did you spend in that period on the streets when you were violent?

Four years, five years. From fifteen until now, except these past seven months that I've lived here. I guess I had to learn from getting hurt myself. I've been rolled myself, and it wasn't pleasant.

Can you tell me about that?

I was at a bar in Calgary, and these two guys were drinking with me. I had all the money, and I was buying rounds. I was getting drunk, and so were they. They went to take my last jug, and I got really mad.

"Give me back my jug!"

"No. It isn't your jug."

"I was buying this all night. Come on." So I gave the guy a shot in the head. There were two of them. They wouldn't give me back my beer. So then I asked them both to go outside. They dropped me right away. Broke my jaw in two places. Stole my backpack. They kicked my in the head about ten times with steel capped boots. It was a pretty low experience.

You went to the hospital?

I didn't go to the hospital for two days because I didn't think it was broken. It hurt, but I was so wasted that night that I left it until three am two nights later. Then they told me it was broken in two places. They wired it shut for two months. That was hell.

What else did you see on the streets?

I had a real shitty experience. I was panhandling. I asked this guy for some spare change.

He said, "Sure buddy."

He threw me some change. So I went to pick it up, and he stomped down on my hand with his cowboy boots. He broke my hand.

I had a lot of run-ins with the police and went to jail a bunch of times. It's very violent. I don't know why. I don't think that's really my nature. It isn't my nature.

What's your nature?

Fun loving. Easy going. You don't screw me around, I won't screw you around. I care too much for everything. That's now, I guess. I was very intoxicated, I guess that's the word, throughout that whole period of time, throughout the whole past five years.

I am not violent. I prefer to get along with everybody rather than hurt anybody. That's everybody, not just pick and choose. It's a big turn-around. I used to hate everybody, except the choice few.

Were you part of a gang?

I was never part of a gang, unless you want to call punks gangs. I don't like gangs.

As soon as I met these punks, I immediately became one. I enjoyed the nature of it. I still do, but not the violence.

What has changed that you don't want to be violent anymore?

I dunno. Me. I just don't want to be violent. I don't like violence. I used to enjoy it. Maybe I was so wasted throughout that whole period of time, and just wanting to get more wasted, that violence just came out of me. It's not in me any more though. I can go and get wasted and not be violent. No problem.

Were you unhappy on the streets ever?

Unhappy? No. Well, discouraged sometimes. Just not enjoying what I was doing. Panhandling was really

discouraging sometimes. People shoot you down. I think I was just fucked up from my childhood. I didn't have any motivation to go anywhere else, except to get wasted and have a good time. Do nothing. Get wasted and not work. Not have to pay rent. Not have to do any of that shit.

It's being free, except you get discouraged because people put you down. I don't know why I was on the streets. It just happened, and I went with it and relaxed with it. It's comforting somewhat. You get friends on the street. They're like your brothers and sisters and keep you comfortable. You take care of each other.

An experience of loyalty?

Yea.

That's something that there wasn't a lot of when you were a kid?

No. Not at all.

I like to be trusted too. I was never trusted at home. I'm very trustworthy now, that's for sure.

I've changed a lot now. I'm even working. I'm paying rent. It's kinda comfortable. This past couple of weeks, I've been working my ass off. It's a different experience. Normally it should be the opposite. I should be out getting wasted, not working, panhandling, doing it the easy way.

I can do without the derogatory comments from most people though. No-one likes to be shot down. Every panhandler gets it.

What would you like people to know about you and the streets?

I'm fucked up. That's why I was there. A lot of mental damage from being beaten as a kid. They can't really understand I guess, unless they've been there. But if they've been there, and made it to something else without being on the streets, then power to them. I'm mentally confused.

I was there because I was fucked up in the head, and I couldn't cope with civilization's reality, their morals, the way they expect you to be.

How do you think you are expected to be?

People my age should have a job and be taking care of themselves, rent, food in the fridge, not drinking. That's fair. But you get a lot of mental damage if you go through the childhood I went through. I've put it all behind me. But you go through a state where you just don't give a shit about anything.

I prefer physical abuse to mental abuse any day. But I find I have a strong mind now due to living on the streets, experiencing a lot of shit.

I stopped stealing. I went to do a break and enter on this lady's house that I had worked for. She had trusted me. She had a big bar, and we were just going there to steal some booze while she was out of town. We went to her place, and the sliding door at the back of her house was open. We went in and stole about twenty bottles of whatever. We went home, and we drank it all down. We came back to take some more. This was the same night. We had drunk the twenty bottles. We were pissed, and we didn't need any more. We went back, and the lady came home. She came in the back door while we were rifling bottles into bags.

She walks in and says, "Oh, my God." She looks at me. I was disappointed. So I just ran out the back door with a few bottles. I don't think I've stolen ever since. That was

disappointing. I did have respect for a couple of people, I guess. She was a nice lady.

I had my ass kicked five times one night. I picked five different scraps with people. I got my ass kicked every time. I still kept on fighting. I like to get beaten up sometimes.

Why do you think that is?

I want to know if I can still take a beating. Sometimes I don't mind taking a beating. Not any more. I guess I could handle taking a beating, but I wouldn't ask for it. If I took one, I wouldn't mind it, because maybe I need it just to keep me in line. A pretty harsh reality. I guess that comes from my dad.

My dad used to shit-kick us every day. Every day, just for nothing. I went into my dad's bedroom one morning when the phone rang. It was his brother on the phone. I'm only about seven years old.

I woke him up and said, "It's your brother. He's on the phone, and he really wants to talk to you." Before I could say another word after that, boom, he gave me a shot in the jaw. This guy was a big fucker. He sent me flying across the room. Shit. Just for waking him up and telling him his brother really wants to talk to him.

I guess I went through a lot of mental shit when I was younger. I think I cleansed myself out of living on the streets. I gained respect for people. I gained manners for some reason. Surprising.

Maybe because I didn't have respect for my parents, or the people around me, at that age. I was just in a big mess, I guess.

When you go to the streets, everybody who is friends with you, that you meet on the streets, are cool. They'll take care

of you. They'll help you out when you need food or something. When you're having a bad day panhandling or been wired out on something, some drug or other. People help you out.

The streets aren't as bad as people project them. It's worse if you're violent. You do it to yourself. I rather enjoyed the streets actually. A lot of it's garbage, but a lot of it's fun. I'd like to tell you more about it, but I was pretty wasted.

I've met thousands of street people. They're all screwed up in their own way, but everybody is. They're all nice. I guess the ones that aren't nice, aren't nice to the people who aren't on the streets.

I've lived in every city in Canada. Hitch-hiked from city to city. Just to see. Just to do. Find a new street.

What's next in your life?

I don't have any goals. I did have a goal. I did take a commercial cooking course during the last year in the group homes. I quit it. It was three years, and I only took a year. I've always liked cooking. It's the only nice thing my mom ever said to me. She said I could cook good. I guess that was inspirational. So I tried cooking.

Would you like to be a cook?

Yea, I think so. I dunno. Maybe. I do enjoy cooking. I did want to be a chef. I dunno what happened though.

I did want to be a football player. I used to hang out with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers as a ball boy. They taught me how to play football. That was a definite goal. I gave up on that one too though.

Drugs and alcohol were my goal, I guess. No motivation. I'm starting to think about it though. Who knows, maybe it would be fun to find an occupation.

Good luck

Mm Hmm. I've always thought about going back and taking a cooking course.

Do you think you would succeed?

If I went back, for sure. It was a long time ago, the last time I tried it. I fucked up, when I was younger. In this past year there has been a lot of thinking and a lot of slowing down. No more violence. I think it's made me a much better person. I still have some vulgarity, but I don't like to shoot people down. Not any more.

Friends have taught me this.

- end Chapter Sixteen -

Table of Contents

Chapter Seventeen

John

“Turning Anger Inward”

Under a Tree by the Side of the Road

How old were you when you went to the streets?

Fifteen.

It was a choice I made on my own. Unlike a lot of people, I wasn't forced to do it. There were arguments and fights with my parents, but I was never disembodied from my home. I wasn't kicked out. It was a hard time in my life. We had just moved to this country two years ago, and my life had changed. It had gotten really weird. I came from a different culture. Things were a lot more strict. There was a British influence. I'm from Bermuda. Times were different. People were different, and I didn't feel like I fit in.

Eventually it fell apart at home. I wouldn't fit in at home. I wouldn't help out at home. I wouldn't help my parents. It came to a point where I hated them for moving me from my homeland, friends and everything that I knew, bringing me to this country.

We moved to a small town in southern Ontario. It was a one street town with about fifteen houses. Maybe there was a population of seventy-five. There were a lot of rednecks, a lot of violence, a lot of bad feelings.

It was alien to me. I spent three days a week getting beat up, getting chased. Kids saw me as different. I had different

styles of clothing. I had a heavy accent. Kids can be pretty weird.

Tell me when you left.

The first experience I remember was that I disappeared for about two weeks. There was a party and I remember getting really drunk, and I remember doing lots and lots of pills. I can't remember what. I was really into doing pills at the time. The next thing I knew I was living in squats. It was comfortable and I knew a lot of people there. They were all freaks. They were all outcasts. They're still some of my best friends. I don't see them much any more.

I went back to my parents after a couple of weeks. I talked to them and let them know I was still alive. It was always open that I could come back if I wanted to. I chose to live on the streets. It was where I was comfortable. They were good people. They were always willing to help. I don't think I've ever gone hungry.

For a while I was holding a double life. I was involved in the military through cadets and the militia. At the same time I was living on the streets and living in squats. It was really exciting. I was doing things that I read about as a kid. We got by. We had to steal a lot of things. We had to scam a lot of things.

But we never really hurt anybody. That was one good thing. As far as I was concerned we were pretty ethical people. We'd steal from supermarkets and businesses. That was our justification. Take from the system and not from private individuals.

It was pretty easy to find a place. I have spent nights on the street in parks and on beaches. I'd always find a way to get drunk or high. That was all I really needed. From there I could always lean up against a tree, no matter where I was.

Getting hassled was a big part of it. I spent many nights in train cars. You get roused at two o'clock in the morning by somebody pushing you around and throwing you out the door and threatening to call the cops.

I've been chased many times. We'd go and break into trains that were left in a park. One night I broke the seal on one of these trains and opened the door, and it was full of grain. The grain came pouring out on top of everybody. We climbed in and slept in the grain. It was incredibly warm, piled up to your neck in grain. But when they showed up, they weren't very impressed at all. I didn't get charged, but a friend of mine did. Two or three people got caught that night, and the rest of us split up and ran. It was scary sometimes. There was the shock of being woken up in the middle of the night and threatened and chased.

We all bonded together. There was a select group of us, about seven, that stuck together. We'd help each other. We never let anything happen to the others. We'd never let them go without, cigarettes, food, drugs, place to sleep. We have friends and we help each other out. I'm still basically living on the streets I guess. My streets are the woods. I live in a basic plastic shack that I built in the woods. I work by trades. Living on the streets was never a lonely thing for me, and it didn't have to be a lonely thing. I met some of my best friends there.

How do you operate in that environment and keep your sanity and sense of place?

Keeping your sanity is really hard. Everything you are living is completely different from what you learned. I guess you could say I lost my sanity at one point. I spent some time in and out of psychiatric wards, probably a year in total. It was through an inability to cope with my surroundings. I always felt there was something missing. All my life, I've been told I should be doing something else. That got to me.

Coping with your insanity comes to you after a while. I just had to realize that I'm not like everyone else and that I'm not going to work forty hours a week. I'm not going to work for forty years. It's just not who I am. I'll probably end up living like I am for the next twenty or thirty years. Hand to mouth and day to day.

It gets troubling sometimes, being isolated and alone. Sometimes I have a hard time piecing together thoughts and putting it into perspective.

Not doing anything. Not going anywhere. Watching my friends go places. It was hard. When I moved out, a lot of the people I grew up with stayed in school. They did the whole school thing. Got out. Got jobs. Now they're married and living good lives for them.

You never measured up?

Yea. That's what I felt. I never could cut it. Not to my parents. Not to teachers and not to people I grew up with.

In the military, I was trying to force myself into having some discipline. I needed something. I needed some direction.

For a week or so I'd go off with the military. And then I'd come back and do lots of drugs on the streets. Being in the militia is a weekend thing. I really wasn't getting anything out of it, and it wasn't going anywhere.

I stayed in Montreal for a while. It was a weird place. It's very aggressive. It's friendly in places, but it's also aggressive. The street life is aggressive. The cops are aggressive. Little things out on the streets will start fights, major fights. You could just walk by somebody the wrong way. You could spit just as you were passing by somebody, and they'd take it the wrong way. More than likely, you're going to get fucked up. You're going to get hurt somehow. Not just smacked in the face. You're going to get beaten

severely. Knifed. In the month that I was in Montreal, two people got stabbed. That got me off the streets in Montreal. I didn't want to stay there. Get into the rural areas and you're fine.

A lot of people sitting around waiting for nothing. Waiting, but there's nothing there for them. They're good people. They're smart people, but they have nothing. They're angry. In cities like Montreal and Toronto, there is money everywhere. You see this. The people treat you like you're trash. All it does is make people angry and hateful. If you haven't got anything to eat, and you're bumming change in the street, and somebody gives you a smart comment, tells you to get a job, it's really the last thing you want to hear. It might be the best solution, but the idea of getting a job is pretty alien. You'd be working with these people that you hate so badly. It's like a big circle that keeps going around. You hate them, and they hate you. Nobody's really got a reason why.

I've gone through a lot of years trying to deal with all of this. Nowadays, I've put it behind me. I don't understand as well. I'm not a violent person. I'm not an aggressive person. I'd much rather avoid conflict through any way. I'm usually the one to make adjustments in my life.

Thinking back, I remember being very angry. Spiteful of people. They never treat you like a human being. They'd never treat you like you were anything but a useless piece of flesh. You were taking up breathing space. It just breeds hatred. There's no choice.

So when you're on the street and there's drugs and angry people and fear, how do you work with that?

I used to deal with it a lot differently than I do now. When I was living on the streets I was a very angry person. I wasn't happy-go-lucky.

Did you do anything hurtful?

Only to myself. I've never hurt anybody else. I've been in fights but I've never instigated a fight. I've been jumped numerous times for numerous reasons, and I've had to fight.

When it came down to dealing with my aggression and my anger, I was into self-mutilation. Violence was punching things. I've broken my right hand close to twelve times and my left hand close to four. I've got scars all over my body from cigarette burns and knives and razor blades. I've thought many times about why I did that. I felt responsible for many things that went on around me, a lot of my friends' problems, my problems, bad situations I would get into. I would punish myself for them. I felt that it was my fault. I felt that there was something I could have done to deal with it. That's just me. Ever since I can remember, I've always felt useless. I should be doing more.

It's hard because it's not something I usually talk about. That's one thing I've been very private about. A lot of people I know would do it and they'd show it to people. Almost like battle scars. I couldn't help being ashamed of it afterwards. Again for being so weak. I always thought there should be some other way to deal with it. It came down to a point where it was a ritual. Depressing state of mind. Starting to feel things coming on. I'd have mood swings. I'd isolate myself from people, and I'd spend time by myself and think about it. Thinking about it would build the anger up more and more. I'd get to a point where I was in a rage. Sitting by myself in a room. I'd work myself up into a rage where I was physically sweating and hyper-ventilating. It was like a high. It was such a release to misdirect my mind, even for a split second. Being able to take the knife and slice open my skin. The pain was secondary. There was no pain. It was just the exhilaration of it. It was the release of all this tension and anger.

I had no other way to deal with it. I couldn't talk to people. I couldn't open up to people. I couldn't really express how I was feeling. My best friend was giving me a hard time one night. There were problems between myself and his girlfriend. Nothing serious. We were just not getting along very well. He started coming on down my throat. I couldn't deal with it. I really wanted to hurt him. I really wanted to hurt him badly. We pushed ourselves to the point where we were going to start hitting each other. I couldn't do it. I ended up breaking my hand on a telephone pole. I could never hurt anybody. For years I hated people so badly that I did want to hurt people. I really wanted to go out and find somebody and beat them. But I could never do it. Even when I was in fights, I would back down after a while. I'd feel too bad about it. All my aggression and anger had been turned onto myself.

I've been told things by psychiatrists and psychologists. One person told me I didn't swear at my parents enough. I can't see it myself. I don't think that would make my life any easier right now. They always had answers. It was because you were moved up here as a child and taken away from your friends. It was because of this and that. It just doesn't make sense to me. There's just something about me that doesn't fit in. I'm just not part of this society.

I've stopped cutting myself and burning myself. I still have a tendency to punch things every once in a while when the anger builds up. But it takes a lot nowadays to push me to that point.

I've just started accepting the fact that I'm different than 70 or 80 percent of the people in the world.

I'm healthier. It's harder though. It was so easy to get rid of it for a day. Everything goes away. Go on a rampage. Rip things apart. Smash things. End up in the hospital. More times than enough I've completely destroyed my personal

life. Every personal belonging I've ever had, thrown it away, burned it, trashed it. But it's always been directed towards myself. That aggression has to be directed towards something. I'd much rather see it directed towards myself than somebody else.

Some people have a tendency to turn it towards other people. I've never understood that. I couldn't fathom that at all. It's not me. It's them. To each their own.

The amount of violence coming from every one else got me off the streets. So many people I know have been beaten within an inch of their life, or are dead, or beat people within an inch of their lives. I decided I didn't want to be one of these people. I don't want to hang out with someone I think is going to jump me at any second.

It's nice to be able to have friends that you can trust, who aren't going to stab you in the back.

- end Chapter Seventeen -

Table of Contents

Chapter Eighteen

Francine

“Part-Time Street Girl”

Sitting in the Bleachers

When does this story start?

When I was born.

When I was a baby, my mom decided that I didn't like her. When I was a little kid, she used to beat me with a baseball bat. Most of what happened I can't remember. I was too young.

What can you remember?

We used to have to go to sleep at six o'clock at night. We had a nap in the morning and a nap in the afternoon. So of course when we went to sleep at six o'clock, we would wake up really early in the morning. Me and my brother would play together. She didn't want that because she was still sleeping.

She worked in a hospital, and she had some hospital gowns. She tied us on our bed on our bellies. She tied us down and tied the gowns around the mattress, and we couldn't move. That's one of the worst things she used to do to us.

When I was a three year old I would drop my glass. As a three year old it was normal to drop my glass. She would beat me up and send me to my room.

She was really really religious and always went to church. When we were a little older, we had to do the beads. She would beat us up and we had to go in our room and do the beads.

Did this go on all through your childhood?

All through my childhood.

We weren't allowed to do a lot of the things the other kids could do. We had to stay in the back yard. When we were a little older we could go down to the end of the block, but we couldn't go around the block on our bicycles. It was not fun.

We became really bad. When we went to school, we were really bad kids. With other kids, we were really bad too.

How were you bad?

At school I didn't want to listen. I would jump on people for no reason. I wouldn't like someone so I would jump on them. I used to beat up kids. Kids were beating up my little brother so I used to beat them up. I wanted to protect my little brother. And I was beat up too by other kids.

I didn't get good marks in school.

We would drive the babysitters crazy doing all kinds of things to them.

When we were a little older, about nine and ten, we used to sneak out at night through our window and do weird things. We used to change For Sale signs on people's houses. In the summer time a neighbour would leave a window open. We would make a hole in the screen and put a garden hose through and turn it on.

We started to steal things. There was a store beside our house. The back of the store was in front of our house. All

the delivery trucks would come to deliver and be open. We used to steal lots of things from the trucks. Beer and wine and chips and books. Sometimes we stole sex magazines and sold them at school.

For my first three years of high school, I was in private school. It was run by Brothers and Sisters. We had to go to church before classes. I didn't like that. I did all kinds of bad tricks there too. You can't eat gum in class, and I was always chewing gum. I never did my homework. We couldn't wear jeans, no running shoes, no t-shirts. So I used to wear mini-skirts to freak them out. I got kicked out of the school.

In my last two years of high school, I started getting into drugs pretty heavy. I used to skip classes and got kicked out of school for three days. I had to copy seven pages of the encyclopedia. It took me two weeks of writing really small to do it.

I met a girl who became my best friend. She is still my best friend. Her father is an alcoholic. He beat her up and her brother and her mother. We had the same kind of childhood, so we got along really well. We understood each other, so we started doing bad things together.

We would go in the mall and steal everything we could. And then we'd sell it. We got into drugs. We didn't have much money so we were doing bad drugs. Sniffing glue and shoe polish. Then we discovered acid. We did a lot of acid.

I wasn't allowed to sleep over at friend's places, but she was my best friend, and my parents knew her. So I could stay at her place. At first my parents would call to make sure I was there. Then, after a year, they didn't call any more. So I would say I was going to sleep there, but I wasn't. And my friend used to say she was going to sleep at my place, but she didn't. We would go out partying together.

We lived in a small town outside of Montreal. Then we discovered Montreal, the big city. We started hanging out there. We met some punks. We'd go and spend all night in squats. We were panhandling in the streets for money. We got to know the people who were hanging around. The drug dealers.

Tell me about that scene.

We were in a movie as extras, just the background people. The scene was in one of the biggest malls in Montreal. That's where we met a punk. He was living around there. The next weekend we went to see him and his friends. We got to know the bars. We had false identity cards. We got drunk all the time. We were drunk at school. We'd leave in the morning with a thermos of rum and orange juice and drink all day. At lunch time, we'd go to the liquor store and drink and drink. We'd go into Montreal on the weekend and drink. We were pretending that we were sleeping at each other's place so we could stay up all night.

When the bar closed, we'd go off with our punk friend and his gang. There was this big trip to beat up blacks in the metro. We never beat up anybody, but they did. It was pretty bad. They were pretty hard core people.

It was a big punk gang and everybody had black leather jackets. And there was a big skinhead gang. A skinhead would beat a punk. And the punks would beat up skinheads and both were beating up blacks. They'd look for somebody who was not in their gang. You could see the difference in the way they dressed and did their hair. They'd just beat him. He was alone and three or four guys would walk behind him, make sure nobody was looking and beat him up. They'd take his boots and his coat and money and drugs, everything. They were really bad. We never agreed with them, but they were the only people we knew. We had fun.

We could drink and smoke and sniff and do acid. They were taking us to places. They knew where to squat.

What were the squats like?

Abandoned buildings a little out from the downtown area. The squats were ugly, dirty, full of people lying down everywhere. There were old mattresses and old blankets. People used to destroy everything. If there was a toilet, just throw it away. Break it. If we were downstairs, we would make a fire to keep warm. It was really dirty. There were always lots of people that we didn't know.

There were fights too. We would get drunk and smoke and go there and stay awake until six o'clock in the morning. If we needed more money, we would steal cans in great big garbage bags from return depots and turn them in for money. These were bags of 500 cans.

We did everything we could do to get money and buy beer and liquor. We bought everything, rum and tequila, to have something for night-time when the bars would close.

That was life in the squats, drugs and fights and booze. Very bad stuff.

Were you ever frightened?

Sometimes, yea. But I stayed quiet. My girlfriend did most of the talking. She made the friends, and I followed her. I was looking and getting drunk. Lots of the time I was so drunk I couldn't remember what I had said.

I know that I've slept with guys that I didn't know. It was pretty weird.

Then it became really hard with my mom. I was a rebel. I didn't want to stay home ever. She beat me up until I was fourteen. That was the last time she beat me, and it was the

worst time too. She wanted to kill me. She just wanted to kill me. She would be okay for a minute and then go into a wild mood. She'd lose her mind. She'd just go crazy, and beat us up.

In my family, my mom is the boss. My father doesn't have a word to say. My father is really shy. He says, "All right, I'll do what you say," and not argue. They never got in a fight because my father won't fight. She's the boss. Even if she was beating us up, he wouldn't say anything. Anything!

Did he ever beat you up?

Never never never. Most of the time she was doing that, he wasn't there. He was at work. My father is a good worker. He's been working for twenty-three years now at the same place. He's always worked there. Everyday. Six days a week. It's not that great a job. He's making maybe \$30,000 a year, and he's got a house and a family.

Her way to do things was, "I am right. You're not right." She knows everything. Even if you tell her something. For her it's not right. She doesn't have an open mind.

My dad found out that I was smoking cigarettes. He quit smoking but he started again, and he had to hide from my mother. He can't confront her. He can't tell her that he's smoking and "I'll smoke if I want to." So he didn't tell my mom that I was smoking, because he knew I would tell her that he was smoking too. So we would hide together to smoke. He would give me money sometimes to buy cigarettes.

But I never had money. All my friends had money and were buying drugs and beer. I would steal money from my mom. My brother was a paper boy, so he had lots of money. He had \$200 in the bank and always money on his desk. I would take money from him. At this point I owe him \$500. Whenever I see him, I give him a little bit.

Did you tell him you were taking it?

Well, he knew. We would fight about it. But me and my brother were like twins. We are twenty months apart and we really like each other. We are always together and support each other. We play together and have the same friends. Until I started getting into drugs. At first he said, "You're stupid. Don't do that. It's bad for you." Until the day he asked me if he could buy a gram off me.

He knew I was stealing money from him, but he couldn't do anything about it. Even if he would hide it really well, I would find it. I knew all the hiding places.

I always told him, "I'm going to give it back to you. I'm going to give it back one day."

When I was fifteen, I got a job at the little store beside my house. I was working in the pharmacy for four months. I was making money, and I was stealing cigarettes from my boss. For four months, I had tons of cigarettes all the time. I never stole money, but all my friends could go shop there when I was working and they wouldn't have to pay. When my boss found out about it, he made my mom come, and he laid me off. He made my mom come with me to tell her why I was laid off. He told her the things I had stolen. That was bad. My mom was really angry. She couldn't beat me now because I was too old.

I never touched her but I would have then if she had pushed it. I was big enough and strong enough.

I never disrespected her. My brother all the time used to say to her, "You're stupid. You're a bitch. You're crazy. Fuck you!" But I never did things like that. We would fight, and she would say her point, and I would say mine, and I would say she was right. So I would shut up and go away. I never insulted her.

When I had that job, I had money so I could party. I was going to school too. All weekend I would drink and smoke and blow all my money.

I was still into getting drunk. I was still on acid. And my friend too. For me and my friend, the main thing was to get as drunk as we could all the time. I was an alcoholic. I needed it.

I was getting drunk before I went to work. But not too drunk because I had to work and be with the public.

The family scene was getting worse and worse. I would argue more with my mom and not listen to her. She would say "You come back at eleven o'clock tonight." And I would not. I'd come back at four o'clock in the morning. She would be sitting in the stairs waiting for me, and she would give me shit. She grounded me for a week. But I would go out through my window. My friend was waiting for me at the little store. My mom found out about it, but she couldn't do anything. She'd stay up all night watching for me.

How long did your Montreal experience last?

It was for a year, a big year, that we were doing that on our weekends.

Then we met some people from our town and our school. These were new generation hippies. They were not punks and skinheads. They didn't use as much drugs and alcohol as you can in one night. They were nice guys, and we started to hang out with them. I made a boyfriend with one of them. Slowly, we started quitting our Montreal trip. Slowly tripping more with them.

In the town where I lived there was a mountain. It was a provincial park. It is really neat. It had lakes. In the winter time there was skiing. It wasn't the country, but we had this

little forest. It was fun, and we started going there more often.

I finished high school, and that summer between high school and college was the worst. I wouldn't listen to her. I would tell her I was going to sleep at my friend's place but was going to my boyfriend's, and she was really against that. Sex before a wedding is not good. She was upset.

His parents were really really nice. They were old hippies. They were really mellow. He was a year younger than me. He was fifteen, and I was sixteen. But we could sleep in the same bed. They were really nice people. Really really nice.

Every day she was telling me how stupid I was. For her I was an asshole. I had no future. I was always talking about quitting school, but I never did. I finished high school.

With all that going on, you finished your high school?

Yea. I don't know how. I never studied. From the first year of high school until the last year, I never never studied. I never did my homework. Or at least only between classes, or I copied from somebody else. And I passed every year. I never failed. I was always on the border. I think that if I had studied and done my homework I would be a brain. Most of the last years I was always drunk, and I couldn't have been listening that much.

She was telling me, "You're so stupid, and I hate you. You're gross." She thought I was a junkie. She was sure that I was a prostitute. She couldn't understand how I had all the drugs I did and not have money. She still thinks I am a prostitute. How do I travel around?

She said I had to wait until I was eighteen to get out of the house, and I was sixteen going on seventeen. I was spending as little time as possible at home, because I didn't want to deal with her. It was really bad. Once she took all

my things and put them in a backpack and put it on the porch.

I said, "Oh well, okay. Bye."

And she said, "No. You have to come back at eleven o'clock."

She'd change her mind. And I came back because I didn't know where to go, and I was afraid to go out on the streets alone. That summer was the last moment. It was always on the border. She wanted me to leave, but her belief was that she couldn't kick me out of the house, because I wasn't eighteen.

Then one day it was just it. I had just started college. We had a big fight, and she told me how much she wanted me to leave. She couldn't stand me, and I was stupid and an asshole and had no future and all that. She told me to leave.

And I said, "Yes, with pleasure. I'll leave. I hate you too."

As I was packing all my stuff, she said, "No you have to come back."

"No, I'm not coming back."

That day I left. I left totally. I came back once. I opened the door. I didn't say anything. I came and grabbed the rest of my stuff and left.

I went and talked to a friend and asked him if I could stay there for a while until I found a situation. But this guy was bad. He was really bad. He was on coke a lot. He was stealing cars. He was a really good mechanic. He'd steal cars and sell them and have money and buy coke with it. He'd have coke parties. At first I was doing coke with him too.

When I was living with him I was always scared that he would rape me. All the time I had to be aware. Twenty four hours a day. He never did. He would bring back girls, and I was sleeping on the floor beside them. It was a little small apartment. It was weird. At one point I realized, "Whoa. I don't want to do that. I'm not into that any more. It's really bad stuff." He was always harassing me. I was a girl, and I had to clean everything. It was his apartment. He took care of me, so I had to listen to him.

Then, when I was there, my boyfriend left me. It was too heavy for him. I was really sad about that so I tried to kill myself.

How did you try that?

I ate seventy-five tylenol and went to sleep. But I woke up two hours later, and I didn't want to die any more, but it was too late. I was feeling really dizzy. I didn't want to tell that guy because I wasn't comfortable with him.

One of my friends wound up dropping by in the evening, and I told her. They took me to the hospital, and I spent the night in the hospital. My friend called my parents. I didn't want her to call my parents. I didn't want them to know. This was my own business, and I didn't want them to know where I was.

My father came, and he was crying. He was really sad. He was telling me how much he loved me and how much he was sorry. He said he didn't want me to leave, but he didn't have any choice because my mom didn't want me there any more.

So I left that place, and after a while I found myself living with friends, at their apartment. I crashed there all the time. But I was starting to lose all my friends, because I never had any money, and I was eating at their place and smoking their cigarettes and drinking their beer and begging. These

times I used to go to the city and panhandle and bring back a bit of food.

Once I went to welfare. But I didn't know about welfare and what you had to do. I was stupid. I just thought, "Oh they'll give me money. No problem." So I went there, but I had to have been out of the house for two years, and it was only a year and a half that I wasn't with my parents.

They asked me, "How long have you been out of the house?"

And I said, "A year and a half."

And they said, "Oh, we can't give you money."

So I was panhandling and eating at my friends' place. I was tired of that, and I saw that they were tired of me being around. I was always broke, but I was always partying too.

Then I met a girl that went to school with me during private school. I met her again out of the blue. She had an apartment in Montreal, and she'd just had a baby. The baby's father was a junkie, and she didn't want him to live with them.

She told me, "If you want you can come and stay with me. I am alone and I don't know anyone in Montreal. So you can have a break from partying."

I didn't want to do that. She had a baby and I didn't want to eat her food. She was on welfare with a baby. But I met her again and she said,

"Yea. Come to my place. I don't mind. You're welcome. I like you. You're a nice person." I finally went and that's where I really started changing. She was wonderful to me. She helped me. I never got a job. I was too lazy, I think.

My brother would bring me some food from home, and I would get some food vouchers. I would babysit all the time. The baby liked me. I raised the baby with her. I stayed there for nine months. And I stopped drinking. On the weekends, I would drink a little bit. I stopped acid. I stopped mescaline. I stopped everything. I stopped smoking hash. Living with a baby, I started realizing how much I wanted a family and to start something.

We got along really well. Her mom beat her up too when she was young. We connected. She talked to me a lot. She really helped me. She was my counselor. She was my therapy. She was what I needed. I thank her for everything she did. I still talk to her. She's sad that I'm here and she's there. I had a lesbian experience with her.

One day we had a party for Valentine's Day. A friend had arrived from four months traveling in Central America. It was a get together with friends. After that I left with a new boyfriend to come to BC, and that's where I am now.

I don't do any more acid. I don't do any more drugs. I smoke pot. I will always smoke pot. I like it. I got drunk on my birthday two days ago and that's it. I don't drink anymore. I want land. I know where I am going now. I have my future. I know what I want to do. I know that even if I don't go to school, it doesn't mean I am stupid.

My mom had a big influence on me, because she was telling me all the time that I was stupid and an asshole. I believed it. I had a really big inferiority complex. It was really bad.

One day I'll sit down and tell her everything she did to me. It will make me feel better and take the weight off my shoulders.

She did the same thing with my brother, and my brother left two days ago, and he's coming here to meet me. He doesn't want to go back any more. He doesn't want to see her

anymore. He thinks that he's going to rescue my sister from bad things like we went through, but my sister is already on acid. She did the same thing with her.

She's only thirteen and she wants to leave the house really badly, because we are not there any more to support her.

- end Chapter Eighteen -

Table of Contents

Afterword

The people who have shared their lives in these pages have created an open window to the streets of our nation. Not to look honestly through and see what is happening is to allow the foundations of our society to continue to erode and decay.

It is not in my vision of Canada that any of our people, let alone our children, should become part of an underclass, forgotten and swept aside. But it is difficult to confront the fear and the desperation. It can be dangerous for people, not grounded in health, to confront the social distress that leaves people homeless and despairing of any possibility for themselves.

And who of us is healthy? Who of us is not caught in the intricate web of insensitivity and callousness that has brought this situation into being? Who of us does not cling to the security of being able to intellectualize and evaluate and have the right answers? Who of us does not seek agreement from friends that this is really not our problem?

Certainly I am as guilty as anyone else of holding back from being available as a human being to people in need. I have the same social illness that stops me from being responsive to people crying out for human friendship. I have walked by buskers on the street, playing music, and not looked because I might be compelled to acknowledge their contribution to my day by throwing some change into a guitar case. I have shied away from a plea for help from a destitute person, many times. Out of fear? Of what?

The uncomfortable conclusion that I have come to is that these people have unceremoniously ripped away any pretence that my country, my society, my community, even my personal life, works. These people are but mirrors for the

unworkability of my own life. I either have to try to ignore the unworkability, the broken relationships and my personal contribution to the social illness, or I have to roll up my shirt sleeves and get to work.

Trying to ignore the truth does not work. Somehow the pain and misery of the human condition comes through my barriers and clouds whatever clarity I have managed to create in my own personal space. There is no getting away from it. It will not go away. Am I any different from anyone else in this?

At first blush it looks as though the street kids are the lowest of the low, struggling to feed themselves and living in cold stairwells. Their lot is to survive, moment by moment, without any of the security or conveniences of our modern world. The knowledge that they will be fed today, or have the comfort of home and nurturing relationships, does not exist.

But there are bright lights in this darkness. Having nothing, they do not have the pretentious idea that they have anything. To be able to transform despair into an uproarious and laughing experience of jumping in puddles, in the middle of night, in the dead of winter, is surely a statement of personal and creative freedom that exceeds the bounds of the limited imaginations of those of us who live within the confinement of our tightly regulated culture.

It may be that the real leaders in this country are the street kids. They are our youth who have looked into the boredom and rigidity that apparently awaits them and have said, "NO. NOT THAT!" They have been the ones who have had the courage to face the human condition head on and challenge it, even at great risk to their own life and limb and sanity.

Some of those whom I have talked to have won their personal war with these issues. They have managed to

create their own rite of passage and have passed successfully through. They are smiling with an inner confidence. Others are still struggling and have some distance yet to travel. And then there are those who are still on the streets and who have seemingly been lost. Who am I to say if they are lost or not? It feels to me that to be caught in the swirl of drugs and prostitution and crime is to be lost, but maybe they have designed a life style that suits them just fine.

Maybe.

But I still want for my country to take some real action and be of assistance to the street people. We have the resources to establish a string of hostels across our country for the homeless and destitute. We have the food to feed people who do not have the resources to feed themselves and have nothing left to do but beg for daily sustenance. We have the talent to provide real counselors who can listen with clarity and open up opportunity for people to find a place called home. We have but to act.

The End

Table of Contents