

# SIMPLICITY

Newsletter of the Norfolk Catholic Worker

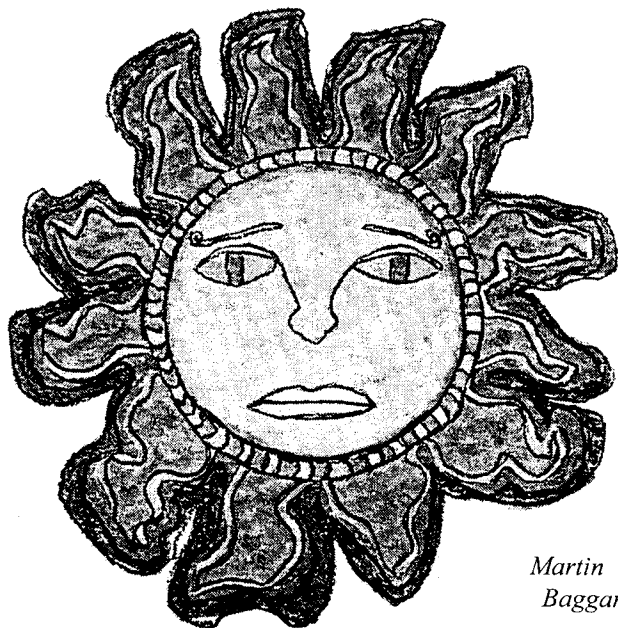
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## No Place Like Homeless

by Paul B.

I wake up and know three things true last night are still true today: it's cold, it's raining, I'm homeless. I thank God for getting me through another night and another weekend.

It is 5:45am on a winter Monday morning in Norfolk, Virginia. Getting my courage up, I peek out from under my Winnie the Pooh blanket and survey my 'bama. That's street slang for a hiding place. It's where homeless people hide our things during the day, so they won't be stolen or thrown away. It's a place where we hide ourselves at night, so we won't be run off or arrested. I think the word comes from the song, "Sweet Home Alabama". My home sweet home is under a bridge. There is a concrete incline that rises from the ground to meet the bridge. I live at the top on a flat area, in a space about 6x10 feet.



*Martin  
Baggarly*

I sit up on a makeshift bench to get my shoes on. One of the problems I have with shoes that never dry is that ammonia starts to form inside. It burns so badly, it blisters my feet. If the weather were warm enough to go barefoot, I'd put them in a fountain. That is not an option right now, so I use vinegar to counter the ammonia, hence the pickle smell. Sometimes, there is too much vinegar left and it burns, too, like alcohol on a cut, but it goes away in about an hour and it doesn't cause blisters.

After that, I pack my backpack: a water bottle, a jar of instant coffee, and a fruit juice bottle to mix the two. Into re-sealable bags I put toiletries, medicine, a roll of toilet paper, my library book, a clean pair of socks, a roll of duct tape, and everything I emptied from my pockets last night. Plastic bags are very important when you are homeless.

As I stand, the sweat pants I use for long johns cling to my skin. I check the bench. It's dry. Water is not making them stick. Dropping my drawers, I see what I feared. I must have had a seizure last night and soiled my pants. Off come the shoes, the pants, and the sweats, and now I'm really cold. The sweats go into a plastic bag and I inspect the seat of my slacks. The stain is not visible. Good. I'll stink, but I won't need two pair of clean slacks. I'll just need something to wear after washing.

It's 6:30! I've got to get going. I have to time my departure so it is dark and I won't be seen leaving. But, once out, I need sunlight. A homeless person walking around in the dark is a suspect, especially with a plastic bag holding clothes. I stash my blanket in a black plastic bag so it's less visible from the street. As I emerge, I see other homeless people coming out of their 'bamas. It reminds me of a horror movie I saw in which, as darkness falls, the damned crawl out from where they had been hiding

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# Why This Issue—Hidden in Plain View

by Steve Baggarly

The two articles in this issue help to make the hidden, visible. Paul B. has been a guest on our soup-line for almost two years. His story sheds light on the everyday life of someone living on the street, the numbers of whom have increased during the past couple years thanks yet again to Wall Street's embrace of criminal greed. Society prefers homeless people invisible, nameless, ignored, stigmatized, and criminalized. For those of us hoping to have "eyes to see" and be healed of our blindness, it is imperative to recognize such people all around us, listen to their stories, and act on what we hear.

Likewise with Cathy Breen's article. Her epistle is a glimpse into the lives of millions of people in the Middle East who have been killed, maimed, or driven mad, lost employment, family, and education, or been forced from their homes as a result of the decade-long US regional onslaught. Yet, in the US, despite the ubiquity of instant global communication technology, we are lucky to hear one person's story here, another there, and we never see pictures of the horrific and widespread human suffering our wars cause.

Much of our work at the Catholic Worker is about this same task of making visible the unseen. Three mornings a week hungry and homeless people tucked into the nooks and crannies of our city materialize for an hour at our soup-line, a reminder that there is a very real, if hidden, refugee population in our midst. Our hospitality house remains at capacity, home to people barely visible to the systems of housing, employment, education, and health care. For seventeen months we were home to a Mexican teenager in immigration limbo. At seven years old he came to the United States in search of his parents and ended up raising himself. Living without papers, underground and invisible, he didn't attend school, see doctors or dentists, or work legally. Thankfully he recently received his green card at the end of a long and trying waiting period.

In August we attended a support rally for PFC Bradley Manning in Quantico, Virginia, where he is held in the Marine Corps brig. Manning is an Army intelligence analyst who faces court-martial for leaking a 2007 video of a US Apache helicopter crew killing eleven Iraqi civilians. He may also be charged with leaking the Afghanistan Wikileaks papers. The video and papers that he is suspected of exposing tell a tale of great numbers of civilian killings and

resultant cover-ups. For making visible the real face of the "War on Terrorism", Manning faces some 50 years in prison. More info at [couragetoresist.org](http://couragetoresist.org).

In July I was one of thirty-six people arrested at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. The Y-12 bomb plant at Oak Ridge was part of the Manhattan Project, supplying enriched uranium for the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. Today, uranium from Y-12 is in every US nuclear warhead and the plant is part of the government's effort to upgrade each of its 2500 operational warheads. Oak Ridge, along with Los Alamos and Kansas City, is also due to have a new bomb plant built to replace the old, quadrupling production capacity to 80 warheads per year should the government resume building new weapons. The hell on earth the puny, prototype Hiroshima bomb created pales before the effects of our modern weapons.

Twenty three people were arrested for blocking the main entrance to the plant as the culmination of a national gathering commemorating 30 years of the Plowshares movement, the Nuclear Resister newspaper, and Nukewatch (a nuclear weapons and power watchdog group). Some were fined in state court, others didn't show for trial, and four repeat offenders served 5-20 days in jail. Thirteen others, including myself, went around or under a barbed wire fence onto the site. We face up to a year in jail and \$100,000 in fines when we go to trial in Knoxville Federal Court on January 11. There we hope to unmask not only the omnicidal work of Y-12, but also the federal court and its laws as the guardians of nuclear weapons, accomplices to an impending doomsday.

Making the invisible, visible, is at the very heart of Christianity. St. Paul describes Jesus as "the image of the invisible God." This same Jesus tells his disciples "what you do to the least of people, you do to me." God is present in all of our homeless neighbors, in every unwanted refugee and immigrant, in each nameless Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, Somali, and Yemeni blasted by our assault helicopters, bombers, drones, tanks, and foot soldiers, and in every child, woman, and man targeted in our nuclear war-fighting scenarios. As followers of Christ, our call is to point to the sacredness of all life, to the blasphemy of all poverty and killing, and to God as one who sides with every victim in every time and in every place. \*\*

(Paul B. continued from page 1) from the sun.

I think I made it and wasn't seen. The rain has stopped and frost is forming on the grass. The wind that blew the rain away is cold on my legs. I sure miss my sweats.

As I walk down a sidewalk I see a puddle in the gutter next to it. I check oncoming traffic before passing. Fortunately, it was summer when I learned how much a car can splash going through a puddle. I think most drivers just don't realize what they are doing. There are some that do, though, like the car that got me. The car windows were down and I heard them laughing and shouting.

My first stop is the Arcade, a small mall with art-related shops. It is the earliest place open where I can go to get out of the cold. Out of the wind and in the light, I take out the duct tape to patch my backpack. It's the only thing I've found that works for patching a backpack. I can also wrap it around my shoes when the soles come off. After fixing my pack I take my medicine. As you may have guessed from last night's seizure, I'm epileptic. Medicine doesn't stop the seizures, only downgrades them. In the restroom, a quick clean with wet toilet paper and I'm a bit better, but still not clean enough to change my pants.

Human Services opens at 8:30 and I arrive a few minutes early. It is the only place I know where I can use the restroom for sink baths, shaving, and hand washing laundry without being thrown out. Except for the restroom, I've given up on Human Services long ago. As I walk in, the reason why is clear. One of the employees is talking to the people in the waiting room: "If you do not have children, we can't see you today."

In the restroom, I wash my feet and change my socks, too. The real shower will be at the Mission that opens at 3:30. So it's time for breakfast. One of the things I have never worried about in Norfolk is starving. There are so many churches running soup kitchens, sometimes we have a choice where to go. Most of the churches that run the kitchens are in an upper-middle class neighborhood known as Ghent. I'm sure many residents would prefer if there were some other place we could go. While walking down the street, I see a Ghent resident walking toward me, looking down. When she raises her head and sees me, she walks across the street. I know what is going to happen next. Looking back, I see she has crossed back over to my side after passing me. Men do this as much as women. It reminds me of part of the definition of pariah: "One

to be avoided and despised."

After eating, I decide to go to the library to kill a few hours. That is how we mostly spend our days, just moving from one warm place to another. I get a cup of coffee and leave the soup kitchen. The wind is really starting to blow. I take a safety pin from my bag and fasten the hood onto my coat.

Once I finish the coffee, I look for someplace to throw the cup away. Unlike downtown, Ghent doesn't have a trashcan at every corner, so I hold on to the cup. I pass a townhouse with trashcans by the curb for pickup. Lifting the lid, I drop the cup into one. Once I do, I hear someone rapping on glass. It is a resident of the townhouse. Through the closed door she yells, "Get that out of my trash can!" The can is on the city's street and has, "Property of the City of Norfolk" written on the side. I am tempted to take the cup from the can and drop it in her yard, but my street motto is "Don't create a scene". I walk off while she is still yelling for me to get back there. As I walk I wonder what else she'd tell the police I did. Who will they believe: the upper-middle class resident or the homeless man? I still try to keep some self-respect so I am not going back. But maybe I should change my route and go to another library.

I make it to the library. I get on a computer. On the Internet I look up ideas on how to survive homelessness. I find one website. The first tip is: "Don't leave your car parked in the same lot more than 2 days." He has a running car!? What I could do with a car! I can't drive with my epilepsy, but who said it had to run? A piece of junk would work fine. It just needs the doors and windows intact. No wind, no rain, no plastic bags holding my life. Wow! I bet I could figure out a way for heat without carbon monoxide poisoning.

I ate so well for breakfast; I'm not hungry come lunchtime. It's time for some light reading. Up to the top floor I go. I'm lucky, there's an empty seat. As I look around, I see most everybody here is homeless or are very poor dressers. About half of them are asleep and the other half is talking loudly. The security guard will come by soon to tell them to wake up or shut up, whichever is needed.

Time passes quickly while I read, and it is now time for my shower. I head to the Mission where I expect to wait in a long line. We homeless wait a lot, a lot more than everybody else, for even the simplest things in life. Taking a shower is a two-part process. First, I wait for someone who checks to see if I have been banned from the Mission. If not banned, I get a piece of paper

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## Between Iraq and a Hard Place

by Cathy Breen

*(Eds. note~Cathy Breen is a Catholic Worker at Mary House in New York City. She lived in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003 and during the occupation. Cathy spends several months each year as a member of Voices for Creative Nonviolence living among Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria and Amman, Jordan. The following is a letter she wrote on May 16, 2010 from Damascus)*

"Ten years ago everyone dreamed about going to America." The words of an Iraqi friend to me recently. But this is no longer the case. Quite the contrary as a matter of fact. Iraqis who have been resettled to the U.S. have been returning to Syria and Iraq as the conditions there have been unbearable. No work to be found, benefits cut, etc. Iraqis here and in Jordan are quite aware of such situations, but they are caught in a bind. The U.S. is the only show in town so to speak; their quotas for Iraqi refugees far surpass those of other countries.

A few days ago I visited a young family with three little children. The children stole my heart a year ago

when I first met them. This family has since been approached for resettlement to the United States. There is no other country with openings. They have already passed through a number of interviews and are awaiting a call to appear for the deciding interview with an officer from the Department of Homeland Security.

The wife's brother in Baghdad told her "Go to any other country, but not to the United States. People returning to Iraq from the states are facing grave problems...kidnappings and killings." She has heard moreover that, should they go to the U.S., she and her husband will have to agree to their sons enlisting in the army when they are of age, even return to Iraq to fight should they be called to. This thought terrifies the mother.

Even before visiting the family, my translator told me how nervous and fearful the family was about going to the states, a place so foreign from their own, so far away. Upon hearing this, I sent an email to some friends in New Jersey, asking if they would be in a position to begin searching for a support group to receive this family. Such a group of friends could make the difference between a frightening lonely experience, and one of feeling welcomed and expected. We shall see what will unfold.

Another family we visited recently also feels trapped. Like the above-mentioned family, they have been caught in the Shi'a – Sunni sectarian violence. They have lost so many family members, as well as the family home, that returning to Iraq is not

an option for them. The husband is on a death list.

The mother repeatedly broke down in tears during our visit as she related the brutal killings of her family. Although she is getting psychological help, she cannot shake her fear and anxiety. "The doctor," she said, "tells me to put the sadness behind me, to think of pleasant things. But I come home to my husband without work...we cannot buy the simplest things for our children...How can I?" They do not qualify for cash assistance, as there is a male in the household. The father gets sporadic work (illegally) washing dishes or waiting on tables. They would like to have another child, she said, but they cannot consider this. "I just want to go somewhere, anywhere, where my children can have a future."

Such a normal desire. A desire all parents have in common. I asked one of their young daughters what she wanted to be when she grew up. "A doctor...a doctor for children. And I want to treat the children for free." I asked her little sister the same question. She thought about it for quite awhile and then replied, "I want to draw pictures." The makings of an aspiring artist it would seem!

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit proposes that "the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic and brave." When Cain cries out

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Alice Hendrickson

(Paul B. continued from page 4) that I take to another room where I hand over the slip and my ID. In exchange, I get a towel, a washcloth, and small bar of soap. My ID will be held until I bring the linens back. With towel, cloth and soap in hand, I go to the dorm. Strangely, there is no line. A sign on the door says, "There's no hot water." I guess that explains it. But it doesn't make any difference, I really need this shower so I go to the shower room and start packing. I take a re-sealable bag and put my watch, wallet, pocket change, and medication in it to take into the shower with me. You can't get high off my drugs, but I figure someone may try to steal them now and find out later.

Once in the shower, I turn the handle all the way to hot. When they said no hot water, they really meant it. Nothing is coming from the showerhead at all. I try a little cold water. It is as cold as the wind outside. But, I've got to take this shower! With some contortions I am able to shower, and am finally clean.

When I'm finished, the Mission is serving dinner, so I have some soup and then I am back outside. The wind has really picked up. Back to the library to wait until darkness is near. It isn't long before it's time to go home. The NEST shelter cannot accommodate everyone who needs a place to sleep, so they have a lottery, and those who don't win are out in the cold. Rather than wait for the lottery and risk traveling in the dark, I head back to my 'bama. Getting to my 'bama is the same as leaving, only backwards. I want to travel in the light and have it dark as I enter. I make it back without problems.

Normally, the wind doesn't get too strong here, but it is whistling through tonight. I unpack my

backpack and go to get my blanket out of the bag. It's wet! My hands are warm enough to feel it. It's too wet to use. So, I take it to my dryer. Beside the bridge are some bushes that I spread the blanket across. If the wind doesn't blow it off, and the daytime temperature stays above freezing, and I remember to bring it in before it rains, it should dry in a few days.

What to do for cover? I have two other blankets. They are about as thick as two flannel shirts each. Normally, I just use them to cover my other blanket. They are both dark colored. I take the larger of the two and spread it out. With the wind blowing, I weigh the corners down with some rocks. Next, I get out my dirty clothes. I spread them out on top of the blanket, leaving about three inches of the blanket exposed. Those, too, need the rocks. Now I get my duct tape and tape the clothes to the blanket every foot, or so. Finally, I put the smaller blanket over it all. Now, I fold the exposed edge of the bottom blanket and tape it across the top.

Looks good, but that was just about it for the duct tape. The shoes aren't coming off tonight. I put on all the clothes I can, crappy sweats excluded.

I get under my covers and thank God for another day. It's been tough, but I didn't go hungry, get killed, or get arrested. No one seemed to smell my dirty pants. I pull the two knit caps I'm wearing over my face and my new blanket over my head. I close my eyes.

There are three things true tonight that will be true tomorrow: it's cold, it's windy, I'm homele--**NO!!** I will not give up hope! I *must* believe tomorrow will be a better day! Maybe I'll find more duct tape. \*\*



Mary Duke Guldán

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(Breen continued from page 3) after killing Abel "Am I my brother's keeper?" he is "also raising one of the perennial social questions: are we beholden to each other, must we take care of each other, or is it every man for himself?"

It is time to try and pick up the pieces of the lives and dreams we have shattered...through the wars we have chosen and continue to choose. The two little girls did not choose this war, nor did their parents. May the light in their eyes help us to find our way.

It is time to open our hearts and homes to welcome and heal what we have broken. Should your family, community, church or other group of friends be able and willing to extend the hand of hospitality to such families, please contact me at [newsfromcathy@yahoo.com](mailto:newsfromcathy@yahoo.com) or (212) 777-9617. \*\*