

PHIL CANALIN

INVISIBLE SOCIETY FABLES

SHORT STORIES
ON HOMELESSNESS



INVISIBLE SOCIETY FABLES



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INVISIBLE SOCIETY FABLES

Phil Canalin

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Dedications

*To my parents, Anthony and Liberata: Thank you for always
keeping a roof over our heads.*

*To Jessica and Kelsey: Your love and enthusiasm give me hope
for the world's future.*

To my wife, Sue: As always, it is You, forevermore.

Also by Phil Canalin

Slow Pitch Softball – More Than Just a Game (fiction/sports/humor)

Just Hug a Bubble! (children's)

Dinner at the Sonneman's (with Sue Canalin, cookbook)

Please visit Phil at his author website

<http://www.philcanalin.com>

and check out his blog link, book event photos and video, and
upcoming writing projects!

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INTRODUCTIONS

Okay, shall we start with introductions? Let's go around the circle. Please tell us your name, why you're here, and anything else you'd like to share. Who wants to go first?"

As Marilyn expected, no one volunteered, but for some silly reason she liked the fact she still always tried. In her head she slowly counted down five seconds: five... four... three... two... one. Right.

"Okay, I'll start and then we'll move on to my right. That's you, Sascha."

Marilyn wasn't sure Sascha or any of them were even listening.

Sascha was sitting with her chair turned backwards, straddling the seat with legs split wide apart. Her hands were crossed and hanging limply over the chair back. Marilyn noticed her fingers and nails were black with grime, as if she had worked hard on a farm her entire life, laboring in dirt. In a way she had, but her farming was done on the city streets, mostly plowing for loose change and partially smoked cigarette butts along the curbs and in the gutters.

In the chair beside Sascha, Mrs. Kreiberg was using only her eyes to track an invisible gnat, flying in irregular circles just off the tip of her nose. Her mouth worked constantly, muttering low in a soft, rolling dialogue with nobody. A cheap plastic grocery store bag covered her hair, held in place by a red rubber band knotted at the back of her neck.

John feigned sleep as always. This was his usual defense system. His arms were crossed tightly against his chest, body slumped half-way down his chair. Dirty boots crossed in lazy elegance in front of him. Marilyn caught John's eyelids fluttering from time to time beneath the black baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, sneaking a peek at the group circled around him.

On the other hand, Marilyn thought Big Maceo really was asleep, his chair a miniaturized, playhouse version struggling to hold up his

huge, bulky frame. His body was just about ready to fall off completely. If he fell, she guessed it would take more than all of them combined to pick him back up. And—whew!—Maceo reeked; he needed a shower.

Marilyn knew them all from past stays, except the last two: mother and daughter. Their sticky nametags read 'Lydia' and 'Rose'. She stifled the sadness at seeing them here at the shelter, immediately lamenting whatever mysterious past actions resulted in their need to stay the night. A mother and daughter. Times had changed, that's for sure.

She spoke.

"Well, most of you know me, I'm Marilyn. I'm one of the program managers here. My job is to interview you, get to know you, let you know the rules for staying here at City Search Ministry Shelter. I already know most of you, except you two, Lydia and Rose. You're new, so welcome, and I'm here to help you get settled in tonight. Next. Sascha."

Marilyn turned to the African-American woman to her right. She was wearing a black knit hat with the green and gold colors of Jamaica encircling it. The woman could have been anywhere from her early twenties to fifty years old. It would have been hard for anyone who didn't know her to tell from her worn clothes and even more worn out look. Sascha removed the hat before she spoke, exposing rows of tangled, course curls. Some mature show of respect?

"Yeah, I'm Sascha. What are we supposed to...? Oh, yeah. I'm here 'cause I would like a bed for the night, you know, get outta the cold. I've been here a couple times before." She replaced her knit hat, pulling it down tightly over her crazy hair.

"Great. Welcome, Sascha," Marilyn replied.

Mrs. Kreiberg was obviously off in her own world so Marilyn decided to skip her for the moment. Instead, she raised her voice a bit louder to wake the dozing John.

"Next, John!"

John slowly shifted his body in his chair until he was sitting up more but still keeping his arms folded across his chest. It must have been difficult to keep them like that with all of the bulky layers of ratty sweaters and coats he had on. John tilted his head up so he could see

everyone from beneath the bill of his cap. When he did so a swath of pink-tinged skin just below the neckline flashed, starkly set against the rest of his dirt-caked exposed skin.

"Name's John," he mumbled. "Need a place to sleep; cops been kicking me off my bench again."

"Welcome, John." Marilyn turned in her seat so she could face the big, sleeping body next to John. Again she raised her voice.

"Okay, Big Maceo, wake up; your turn."

The dark-skinned man was big all right. At least 6 foot, 5 inches, Mateo had a giant torso and ham hocks for forearms. No telling what his weight was—three hundred pounds, four hundred? His untied, greasy brown leather boots were caked in mud. Hands, filthy with long jagged finger nails, were massive, and he used one of them to push back the knit stocking cap he wore, a ball of gray cotton dangling off the tiptop. With the other hand the size of a skillet he vigorously rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and nose, and then daintily scraped the crust from the corners of his chapped and scarred lips. Maceo looked up and smiled at each of the people around the room in turn. Then he spoke, still slumped in his chair, as if it simply required way too much effort to move his body at all.

"Yeah, that's me, Big Maceo. I'm big and hungry and tired of sleeping out in the park. Jes' need a break, you know? Sure hope you got them hot biscuits tonight, Miss Marilyn."

"Yes, Maceo, we'll see what's cooking in a minute. We'll get you fed and a nice shower before bed, too." She smiled. In a world of heart-ache and struggle, it still came down to the simple things in life.

"BIG Maceo, Miss Marilyn, remember?" He reminded her. "I brought another pair of pants. You guys have any shirts or coats or something—these things I'm wearing are old?"

"We'll check, we'll check. Welcome back, it's been a while." Marilyn rotated again in her seat. "Ma'am, Lydia?"

The woman had a big, red down coat on, not in bad condition, and a pair of Eco hiking boots. She also wore a knit hat but removed it along with a matching dark blue scarf before smiling shyly.

"Hi, I'm Lydia." The older woman reached over and grasped the

younger girl's hand in hers. "This is my daughter, Rose. We haven't had a good meal in a couple of days and couldn't find a place to sleep tonight; thought we'd be safe here. I hope that's true. Is that enough?"

"Yes, Lydia, good," Marilyn answered. "We'll have a little more paperwork for you to fill out since it's your first time here, not much." She smiled once more at Lydia and Rose. "Rose, do want to say something?"

Rose shook her head. "No, not really. Just thanks for letting us stay here tonight."

She wore a gray hooded sweatshirt with a denim jacket buttoned over it, faded jeans and black boots; just another teenager on the street. Could just as easily have been returning from the library after doing her homework. Rose's shoulder-length blond hair was in a ponytail and covered loosely by a red, knitted scarf.

"You're welcome, Rose," Marilyn said. Then she clapped her hands lightly, three, four times. "Okay, Mrs. Kreiberg. Mrs. K, are you all right?"

Mrs. Kreiberg had gotten up from her seat and slowly walked around the small circle of chairs. She reached into the bulky black garbage bag draped over her shoulder and pulled out a handful of dark red rose petals. The woman then scattered a few about each chair as she passed, even tossed a few over John, who resumed sleeping.

"Okay, Ms. Kreiberg, that's enough. You know we're going to have to clean that up. Come on, let's get back to your seat."

Mrs. Kreiberg dropped the last of her petals at Marilyn's feet.

"No, no sitting. Got to keep moving," Mrs. Kreiberg told her. "Got to keep moving or can't keep up. World's moving too fast, gotta keep up." She continued her circular stroll.

Mrs. Kreiberg was an older woman, perhaps sixty, sixty-five maybe, wearing a long, ratty, black wool coat, every button buttoned from her shins up to her neck. She wore dark green ski gloves, each of the finger tips cut off, uneven threads hanging from the jagged edges. Upon her nose sat a pair of dirty glasses, with thick nylon string attached to the end of each arm keeping them around her neck. Her plastic head cover crackled as she shuffled around the people seated.

"Well, Mrs. Kreiberg—this is Mrs. Kreiberg everybody. Mrs. Kreiberg, you know you've been here before and have to follow the rules the same as everyone else, right?"

"Yes, yep, yes, we'll follow the rules. No problem, not a problem. Just need a bed, someplace to sleep for just a few minutes. Then gotta go. Moving on, moving out."

"Do you want to take a seat, Mrs. Kreiberg? Please sit down in your seat for a minute like everyone else."

"No problem, not a problem." But Mrs. Kreiberg didn't take her seat, just kept moving around the circle, now dragging her garbage bag of belongings behind her.

"Everyone, I'm going to have someone help Mrs. Kreiberg here. Just a minute, okay?" Marilyn got up, opened the door behind her and stuck her head out. She called down the hallway.

"Travis? You busy? Can I use you for a minute?" She turned back to the group. "Thanks, everyone, it'll just be a minute."

Footsteps sounded down the hallway and then a burly man entered the room, his hair long and unkempt. Two-day's worth of thick stubble grew on his chin and cheeks. Travis had on a big green Army coat that had seen better days. His blue jeans looked crisp and new, though, and his boots certainly looked like good Army surplus. A veteran maybe.

Marilyn smiled at him. "Thanks, Travis. Everyone, this is Travis, a new volunteer here at City Search. First night, so you all be kind."

Travis lowered his eyes shyly and gave the group a slight wave of his hand. Marilyn got up from her seat and took Mrs. Kreiberg gently by one of her gloved hands.

"Travis, Mrs. Kreiberg just needs a little attention. Her file and paper-work are on my desk. Can you see if you can get her settled, maybe find someone to get her cleaned up a little and ready for dinner? Thanks, I appreciate it. Give her the bed in Room 14, okay?"

"Okay, I can do that. No problem," Travis gruffly replied.

Marilyn tried to get Mrs. Kreiberg to look her in the eyes. "Mrs. Kreiberg, this is Travis. He's going to help you for now and then I will check in on you in just a little bit, okay?"

"Come on, Mrs. K., let's head on out with me." Without a moment's hesitation, Travis placed a gentle, deft hand on Mrs. Kreiberg's elbow and led her from the room.

"Okay, time to go, hair long, long hair, time to go. Gotta get settled, but not for too long, get settled, get fed, short rest." Mrs. K continued her pitter-patter out the door and down the hall until the group couldn't hear her any longer.

Now Marilyn turned back to them. "Okay, great, we're all here then. Good. You guys know the drill, of course, except maybe Lydia and Rose. So when Travis gets back he'll have you, John and Maceo—"

"Big Maceo."

"Yes, right, John and—BIG Maceo—and Sascha, you'll need to update your shelter cards first. Then off to the lavatories, whatever, for 20-30 minutes."

"I don't think I need a shower," said Sascha. "I just want to wash up a bit."

"Okay, that's fine, but you might change your mind later. Remember the water's good and hot. There's shampoo, everything. Anyway, after that, then you meet back here for a little talk and video, just like before."

"Are we going to talk about crazy shit again?" Big Maceo's stomach growled loud enough for them to hear. "That video was a waste of time."

"Not the same, you'll like this one. Besides, it's only 15 minutes long so I think you'll survive. And please watch your language, you know better. Following that, a short prayer service with Pastor Richard, and, of course, dinner. Then in for the night, okay? Sound good?"

No response other than a couple of heads nodding. In that moment Travis re-entered to the room.

"Hey, Mrs. Kreiberg's all set. So what can I do next?" he asked Marilyn.

"Well, our intros are done here, so why don't you take the group down to the lavatories. Shirley T. will take Sascha from you when you get there, but you can take John and Big Maceo. Lydia and Rose." She turned to them. "You stay with me to complete your intake forms and liability papers. You have your TB test reports, I hope?"

The mother and daughter both nodded.

"Okay, then the rest of you can go with Travis. Lydia, Rose, you're with me. We'll all meet back here in about 30 minutes, right?"

"One question, Marilyn." This from Travis.

"Yes?"

"There are another twenty or so folk outside the doors, still in line, waiting."

"Yes?"

"Well, what do we do with them?"

"Unfortunately, we're out of bed spaces for tonight. Give them the sheet with the shelter number listings, if they'll take it. They can use the list of shelter phone numbers to call other shelters for available space."

"So send them away?"

"Yes, we only have so much room. We can't help them all tonight. We can't really help everybody that needs help any night. There are just too many."

Travis hesitated. "But these folks aren't going to shop around for shelters. And most of the shelters are booked up for the night anyway."

"Right," Marilyn answered. "Just like us. We're booked, too."

She had worked with many new volunteers before and always, always despised that exact moment when they realized they really could only do so much. That it was never enough. And they all had that moment, every single one of them. Somehow a few like herself, Marilyn supposed, immediately hardened and could hold that sadness and helplessness in and continue to do whatever they could to help. Not many, though, from her experience. At times she considered what kind of person did that make her? Marilyn frequently caught herself staring in mirrors as she wondered about the true answer to that question.

"There are kids out there, too—young ones. Families, Marilyn." Travis' eyes pleaded.

"It's hard, Travis. I know it's hard," she replied. "But we do what we can. Let's get these guys going, okay?"

"What about some of the other space—rooms, offices, whatever?" Travis kept on her. "Any place out of the cold. A closet, whatever. If we turn them away they'll just find a bench or an alley, someplace unsafe."

"Travis, come on," she told him firmly. "We talked about this before you started. These people need our help. They came here, first come, first served."

"Well, crap," Travis said, defeated. "I don't like it."

"I don't like it, either, Travis. None of us do."

Travis turned from her.

"John, Sascha, Big Dude!" he called to them. "Let's go, you're coming with me!"

And as he led them from the room, he turned back one last time to Marilyn and said, "There's gotta be a better way."

"Well, when you find it you please let me know," she replied with a sigh as he left Marilyn alone with Lydia and her daughter to ponder their fortunes.

§ § §

Much later that night, Marilyn was working at her county office downtown, catching up on some work she needed to finish before the end of the week. She had gotten everybody in her group settled into the program at the shelter for the night before leaving. The other staff would look out for them.

And that included Travis, too. She decided she would talk with him in the morning, to help him get past what she knew he was feeling. To commiserate and empathize and let him know she and so many others struggled through the exact same thing. To help him, she hoped.

Her phone rang right at midnight.

It was Shirley T. Shirley T. was one of the Clinic's success stories, a recovering alcoholic, now two years sober, who had come back to volunteer as a part-time employee. Something was wrong at the shelter, not an emergency, nothing to fret about, Shirley T. said, but Marilyn had better come down if she could. She told Shirley T. she'd be right over.

Marilyn shut down her computer and closed up the office. She got in her small commuter sedan and drove the two miles to the City

Search Ministry Shelter. Shirley T. met her as she walked through the front door.

"Here, Marilyn." Shirley T. handed her a single sheet of notebook paper, folded twice over. "This is from Travis. You better read it."

Marilyn stopped to open the note. It was in pencil, in Travis's messy printing, and it read:

"Dear Marilyn,

I understand you all are trying to do the best you can with what little you have. I just know there's got to be a better way. I don't think this is the right fit for me, but I wish you and everyone the best. Thanks for letting me try. Keep trying, I know you will. And I will, too. See you in the trenches—Travis Waller".

Marilyn sighed. Too late.

"And you should come see this, too, Marilyn."

Marilyn followed Shirley T. down the hallway, turning left, away from the client sleeping facilities where it was dark and quiet. She was led into the administrative office area where the managers and volunteers had a few desks, did intakes and case management, filled out paperwork, and met with their clients in private when needed. Usually the doors were kept locked, because of the confidential information filed there and to safeguard the Shelter's office equipment.

But tonight each of the four small office doors stood open, low lights shining from within. Marilyn stuck her head into the first office.

When her eyes adjusted to the light and realized what she saw, Marilyn knew she had expected it all along.

People were sleeping body to body on the floor in the small office, wrapped in Shelter blankets and old sleeping bags, their heads resting on pillows and wadded up coats. Two others slept in a corner, propped up on the two chairs in the office. At least a dozen folks slept quietly, out of the cold night. She assumed every other office was the same.

"Travis?" she whispered to Shirley T.

"Yep," Shirley T answered. "Right after you left he went out and rounded up everyone we had turned away, and then found a few more. Got them cleaned up and fed them himself. Bedded them all down here."

“Okay for tonight,” Marilyn wondered. “But what about tomorrow night?”

Shirley T.'s eyes sparkled with tears. “Travis said the only thing that mattered to these homeless people tonight, was tonight.”

“Tonight,” Marilyn whispered. And her eyes glistened, too.

ONE COAT

Based on the fable "The Fox and the Grapes": The Fox realizes the vines have climbed too high for him to reach the ripe, succulent grapes he craves.

So the Fox convinces himself that they were probably sour anyway and doesn't really want them after all.

The moral of the fable is: It is easy to despise what you cannot have.

Dang, Doc, you guys are busier than hell." Sascha plopped herself down in the exam chair next to Dr. Salim, already rolling up the right sleeve of her shirt. The cuff was frayed and dirty like the wool shirt and the rest of the clothes she wore. She tucked a stray piece of ripped material under the tightening arm-roll to keep it in place. Her body odor smelled like her clothes looked, a bit worse for wear. Luckily, the cool temperatures of winter did much to diminish the odor.

"Did you complete all of the paperwork with Judy in the Intake Room?" Dr. Salim asked, tearing open a packet of disinfectant swabs that would be used to prep her forearm.

The doctor wore tight fitting latex gloves on both hands, tight enough for Sascha to see through to her too short, non-manicured nails. Obviously, Dr. Salim nervously chewed her fingernails. What the hell would a rich doc have to be nervous about?

The Intake Room was the middle section of the mobile clinic, cordoned off from the Examination Rooms on either side by now-closed plastic accordion screens. The screens' half-inch thickness wasn't enough to fully contain the sounds of the day's constant intake interview process, handled by the social worker, Judy. Judy also drove the van to and from scheduled sites.

"Yeah, we finished, after waiting for 45 minutes out in the cold.

Can't you guys get one of them electric heaters or something? It's colder than crap out there today. They got them heaters lining the front of St. Augustine's, so when you're waiting in line for breakfast, you don't freeze your ass off."

"It's always very busy when we do the TB testing," Dr. Salim sighed and pulled Sascha's right hand forward to stretch her arm out flat on the corner of the desk. "And we can do nothing about the cold, sorry. You're lucky enough to have the TB clinic out here every other week. Where is your jacket? Don't you have a coat?"

"Nah, Doc, I left my coat at the cleaners with my other furs and mink coats." She rolled her eyes and noticed the coat hanging on a hook on the wall in the back corner. "Now that there's a nice coat, looks pretty warm. That yours, Doc?"

Without looking up, Dr. Salim answered. "Yes, yes. Now, this is to clean and disinfect your arm for the test."

In a small circular motion she wiped the front of Sascha's arm clean, and then dropped the used swab into a small red plastic container.

"What size are you, Doc? About a medium, medium/large? What's that size, eight, ten? I dig me that little white fur around the hood, too. I bet you can cinch that real tight around your face—that would keep you good and warm. Good and warm no matter how cold it gets out there."

Dr. Salim readied the PPD injection. "Okay, this is going to sting just a little bit... okay, that's it. Over." The used syringe also went into the red container.

Sascha grabbed Dr. Salim's wrist gently with her left hand. "No, seriously, Doc, what—large?"

"What? Large? Oh, yes, whatever, yes, it's a size large." Dr. Salim lifted Sascha's hand from her wrist. "Now, if this starts to hurt or burn or get itchy or get really red and bumpy, please call back here or go to the closest clinic to where you live."

"Doc, I'm homeless, remember? No phone, no place to live?"

"Oh, right, right. So go to the nearest clinic wherever you are and have them look at your arm. But only if it is bad."

"Okay, simple enough. So you think I can get me one of them free coats like that at the office over there, doc?"

"Now you can come back on Thursday, after 1:00 pm, right? If you don't come back on that day to have the test read then today will all be a waste of time and you'll have to do it all over again."

"Yeah, I know, the nurse out there told me. Thursday. One o'clock, yeah. No problem. Hey, doc, can I try that coat on before I leave? I might wanna get me one of those. Hella cold at night, wooh, hella cold, you know?" She stood to go and headed for the coat.

Dr. Salim moved to usher her out of the exam room. "I have many, many more patients outside to test today, ma'am. Please. They are very cold, too."

"I just wanted to try on that coat, doc," Sascha replied, reaching out, but to no avail. The doctor blocked her way.

Dr. Salim slid open the accordion wall so Sascha could do nothing else but leave as she had been directed. As Sascha crossed through the Intake Room, where another homeless client waiting to get tested sat patiently with Judy, Dr. Salim called out.

"Don't forget, this Thursday!"

"Right, right, doc, one o'clock, I think I got it! Bye, Nurse Judy." Sascha walked out the side door of the mobile health van.

"Next, please come in!" Sascha heard as she walked away.

§ § §

"Judy, is there anyone else out there?"

"No one, Dr. Salim. Should we wait?"

"How many no-shows?"

Judy flipped through the intake assessment forms she and Dr. Salim completed on Tuesday. They were back in the mobile clinic van to do the follow-up readings.

"Lessee, looks like we're missing seven. Not bad, seven out of twenty-seven."

"Oh, I hate to waste those PPD injections, they're getting more

expensive. Plus the wasted time, too. Let's just hold on a few more minutes, it is only just now 3:30."

"Don't forget we have to be at that office meeting by 4:00 sharp, which means we have to secure the van by no later than 3:50."

"I know, I know. Just another five or ten minutes."

Luckily, they waited for 12 minutes, because that's when Sascha walked up to the Intake Room door and poked her head in.

"Am I too late?"

"Yes," Judy said. "You are too late, but you're also very lucky. We waited for you."

"Sorry," Sascha said, climbing into the mobile van. "I got stuck downtown. Didn't have a bus ticket. Too far to walk and too scary to hitch. Thank the Lord some nice dude slipped me a transfer ticket! Wooh, I just made it."

"Name?" Judy asked.

"Coleman. Sascha Coleman."

"Coleman, Coleman... Coleman, Sascha! Okay, here, take this and head on back and give this to Dr. Salim." Judy handed Sascha her follow-up forms and off she went.

"Hi, doc. I'm back."

"Hmm, yes, I see. Barely made it, but here you are." Dr. Salim, her hands in the ever-present latex gloves, did not close the accordion wall this time. She motioned to the exam chair. "Sit, please."

Sascha immediately eyeballed Dr. Salim's winter coat, hanging on the hook in the corner. "Hey, there's that great coat again. 'Zit keeping you warm, doc?"

"Yes, it is. You and that coat! Here, I'll take your forms. Thanks." Dr. Salim slipped on a pair of reading glasses and took a quick look, checking off a couple of boxes.

The jacket had Sascha mesmerized, just hanging there as if it had not moved since last Tuesday, like it was just waiting for her. She spoke slowly, softly, like in some sort of trance. "You been using that coat, doc, or just leaving it on that hook to hold up the wall? Man, there's just something about that coat. Yeah, a girl would stay pretty warm in that coat, all right."

"Okay, forget the coat," Dr. Salim answered. "Let's have a look at your arm, please." She grabbed Sascha's hand again to pull her forearm closer. "Your hand is freezing! Are you okay?"

"Just cold out there, doc. Cold and getting colder from what everyone's been telling me."

"Yes, a cold front is here. You must be sure to get into a shelter tonight, be very sure."

Dr. Salim lowered her head to get a better look at the tested area on her arm, peering intently through the glasses that barely hung on to the tip of her nose. She pursed her lips, made a small 'hmmph' sound, shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, and nodded her head.

"Well, looks fine, there is no problem at all." Dr. Salim wrote a note on Sascha's test form, signed and dated it. Dr. Salim pulled the 2nd page copy from the two-page form. She handed Sascha the original top sheet.

"Okay, here you go. Take this to whomever you need to. Do you need any extra copies, Judy can get that for you?"

"Nah, doc, just the one is fine. Can I get one later if I need one?"

"Yes, yes, but you must call ahead or we will not have it on board. Do not just drop in. Call us first."

"Okay. Thanks." Sascha stood up and Dr. Salim did the same.

"Any chance I can try that coat on, doc, any chance at all? I just want to see how it fits and feels on me—I think it's my size."

"No, no, as a matter of fact we are running late for our next appointment at our office headquarters, so we have to go now, too, like you."

"Okay, doc, okay. I'm going."

Judy stood at the exit door, the stack of TB test reports and her planner clutched in her hands. "Come on, Sascha, time to go. Are you ready, Dr. Salim?"

"All right," Sascha said. "See you both, then."

"Take care, Sascha." Dr. Salim waved her out the door. "And stay warm!"

§ § §

In the middle of the clinical staff meeting, Barbara, the office receptionist, poked her head into the conference room.

"Francisco, the security officer from downstairs, and a city police officer are here. They said someone broke into the mobile clinic."

Dr. Salim hurriedly got up from her chair amid a worried exclamation from the group. "What? Come with me, Joseph and Judy. We'll see what's up."

Joseph was the other mobile clinic driver. He and Judy covered a number of duties on the clinical team, one being to secure the mobile clinics after serving homeless clients all day.

"Which van was broken into?" Judy asked. "I thought I made sure everything was locked up before we came up."

"My van didn't go out this afternoon, we just black-bagged a session at Salvation Army."

Barbara, like a seasoned civil servant, did not want to get too involved. "Uh, I didn't ask too many questions, so I don't know too much of the details. They're over in the front hallway for you."

The two officers were waiting for them.

Francisco knew them all by name. "Dr. Salim, Judy, Joe, this is Officer Warren from city police. Someone called in to the security desk downstairs to report they saw a person looking 'weird' around the vans." He motioned the quotation marks with two fingers from each hand. "I walked out to check on it, saw one of the van doors open and radioed CPD, per our security procedures."

"Hi, folks." Officer Warner nodded crisply to them. All business. "I received the call from City Dispatch about 20 minutes ago. When I arrived, the female that allegedly broke into your vehicle was talking to Francisco. He made her wait until I arrived."

Dr. Salim looked worried. "Where is the person now? Is she arrested? Did you let her go?"

"No, no," Francisco said. "She's downstairs, locked in my office."

Officer Warren spoke. "There was no one else in the vehicle. We would like you to see if anything has been stolen or broken. Are there any drugs or valuables kept on the vans? I did a quick walkthrough, but everything looks in order, as far as I can tell."

"Which van was broken into?" Judy asked again.

"The newer one," Francisco answered. "That's the one you two take out, right Judy, Dr. Salim?"

"Yes, right. But we keep nothing of value and we do not store any pharmaceuticals on the vans overnight, just for this reason." Dr. Salim thought for a moment. "There is a small microwave in both vans, though."

"And the phones and radios are left in there, too," Joseph offered.

"Well, could you come with me to be sure nothing was taken?"

They all hurried back to their desks momentarily to grab coats and put them on before heading down the stairs to the main floor. Officer Warren led the way and out through the back doors to the medical van. A quick inspection revealed nothing stolen or damaged.

"Francisco, what was the person doing when you stopped her?" Dr. Salim asked.

"Nothing, really, she was just backing out the door, getting ready to leave. I made her stop and wait for the Officer. She really didn't say anything to me, other than she was just trying to get out of the cold."

Salim continued. "Well, Officer, do we just let her go or what? It doesn't seem like anything's missing."

Judy nodded in agreement. "Everything looks fine."

Officer Warren said, "Why don't we all check with her again? Let's see if she reveals what she was doing or looking for. You might even know the person. I'll take all the info and file a police report, but if you decide not to press charges we'll just release her with a warning."

"Is it safe?" Judy asked.

"Oh yes, she's calm, not angry. Doesn't look like she's high or drunk or off in any way."

They followed Francisco next into the Security Office. To the right was his small office. He took out his set of keys, knocked softly, and then unlocked the door. Everyone but Judy filed into the small room. The culprit was sitting in the chair next to the metal desk.

"Ms. Coleman!" Dr. Salim recognized her immediately.

Sascha looked away for a moment and then brought her eyes back to Dr. Salim's. "Hey, doc. Howya doin'?"

Officer Warren, "So you know this person, Dr. Salim?"

Judy edged into the room. "Sascha Coleman. She was our last patient on the van today. A TB test. She was having her skin-test follow-up."

"Yes," Dr. Salim agreed. "That is right. Sascha Coleman."

"Ms. Coleman," Officer Warren looked at Sascha. "Is that true, you were on that van today?"

"Yes, sir, I was. But I needed another copy of my test report. I forgot to get one from the doc before. She said I could. I thought they still might be open."

"I told her she could get another copy, but not to just show up. Ms. Coleman needed to call first. Plus we are closed at that time."

Judy spoke up again. "Sascha knew we were closing the clinic for the day and must have known she was the last patient. When Sascha came in so late I told her she was lucky we waited so long for her to show up."

"Is that true, Ms. Coleman?"

"Nah, sir—guess I just forgot. I guess I figured they'd still be there and I could just get another copy."

"What did you need the other copy for?"

"Oh, well, you know, in case I lost the first copy."

"You mean the original," Dr. Salim said. "I gave you the original so you could use that one."

"Right, right. Yeah, I just wanted a copy."

"How did you get into the locked vehicle, ma'am?"

"It wasn't locked, sir. In fact, when I got there the door was open, so I peeked in. I thought the doc might be working in the back room so I went back there to see."

"Then what?" Officer Warren asked.

"We were all in a meeting upstairs," Dr. Salim told him.

"Then what did you do, Ms. Coleman?"

"Nothing, officer. No one was around so I just sat for a while. It was colder than hell outside and I just sat for a bit. I don't have a nice winter coat like the doc there, so I just stayed to warm up a bit. Nothing else. I didn't take anything or do anything."

"Any other questions, Dr. Salim? How about you, ma'am?"

Neither of them did.

"Okay, Ms. Coleman, please stay here for a minute. I'll be right back." He ushered Dr. Salim, Judy, and Francisco out of the office and shut the door behind him.

He faced them with his hands on his hips. "Doesn't look like anything else happened, other than her getting into the vehicle somehow. Do you want to pursue this any further? Anything else you want to do?"

"It is a bit unnerving that this happened," Dr. Salim said. "For some reason even more because she is one of our patients."

"What if she does this again? Or something worse?" Judy's voice sounded worried.

"You're positive the door was locked when you both left today?"

"I'm almost certain I locked up. I always do." Judy claimed.

"We are as sure as we can be, but of course we did not go back to double-check anything," Dr. Salim added. "It is normal procedure for us to lock-up each night after we close down. This has not happened on this van before."

"Well, I'll file the Police Report so we have something on record. I can't guarantee this will prevent it from happening in the future, but I'll let her know in no uncertain terms that if she does she will be taken in and prosecuted. I don't think she'll want that to happen."

"Okay," Dr. Salim agreed. "Please let us know if you need us for anything else."

"You also might want to be sure nothing of value is kept on the vehicles. And remind your staff to secure the vehicles each night. It wouldn't hurt to double check too, especially in times like these. You know this area isn't so great."

"Okay, thanks, Officer Warren. And thanks, Francisco, very much."

§ § §

When the phone rang, Dr. Salim was dreaming about defrosting a frozen chicken breast in the microwave at work. Very strange.

The phone rang again.

With a grunt, she reached over to turn on her bedside lamp. The clock radio across the room showed 4:20 a.m. She picked up the phone.

"Yes, Dr. Salim. Yes, yes. No. Of course, I will be there in about 30 minutes." Someone had broken into the office at work.

Dr. Salim dressed quickly, splashed cold water on her face and ran a brush quickly through her hair. She remembered that she had left her other coat at work so she pulled on a sweatshirt before heading out the door.

When Dr. Salim arrived, Francisco met her at the front entrance.

"The police have her in handcuffs, Dr. Salim. The alarm system went off around 4:00."

They hurried upstairs together to the program office.

"What happened, Francisco?" she asked him.

"It's that same lady. Copeland."

"You mean Coleman? The woman that broke into the medical van today—I mean yesterday?"

They entered the main office, the front lock and the doorframe obviously damaged. Officer Warren was there inside with another female officer. He introduced her as Officer Mesk.

"Yes, it's the same person, Dr. Salim. Sascha Coleman. We caught her back there. Francisco says that's your office."

"Yes, yes it is. Is everything all right?"

"Yes. She's the same as before. Calm. Seems straight. Will you please check the place over? Make sure nothing is damaged or out of place?"

"Where is she?"

"We've got her cuffed in our patrol car out front."

"What was she doing? Why is she doing this again?"

"She just keeps saying she's trying to stay out of the cold, trying to stay warm. She said to tell you—doc—that she's sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"We don't know and she won't say. Maybe you can check things out and let us know. She just keeps saying that: 'Tell doc I'm sorry. I'm just cold. Tell doc I'm sorry.' Just like that."

Dr. Salim's walk through of the offices, including a thorough review of her own, showed nothing out of place. She did not notice anything missing at all.

"Well, we'll take her downtown and book her for breaking and entering."

"What will happen to her?"

"Probably nothing, unless she has prior arrests or an outstanding warrant. She'll stay the rest of the night in the lock-up and then be released later this morning, maybe noon. Like I said, she's just calm, not agitated or under the influence or anything."

"It is disturbing she decided to do this to our program, our office."

"Well, she'll be booked for it and this will be added to yesterday's incident."

"And then she'll be back on the street again."

"We'll make sure patrol spends a little more time and attention in this area. Could you please come down to confirm her identification for us?"

"Yes, I suppose, if I must."

"Thank you, doctor."

Dr. Salim could see the outline of Sascha Coleman in the side window as she approached the police car. The siren was off, but in the early morning light the glaring police lights still strobed brilliantly, obscenely. It felt surreal to Dr. Salim, like a scene in a movie.

It was just after 5:00 a.m., the coldest part of the morning, and Dr. Salim shivered in the frigid morning, her breath steaming from her nose and mouth. She realized the sweatshirt she put on in haste wasn't warm enough for this cold. Dr. Salim wrapped her arms tight around her chest and made a mental note to grab her winter coat from her office before leaving.

Officer Mesk led her to the patrol car's rear door. She opened it so Dr. Salim could take a look at the person inside. Sascha Coleman. A brief glance confirmed that.

"Yes, Officer, that is Sascha Coleman. She is the same person that broke into our medical clinic van earlier today—yesterday."

Sascha turned her head to see her. "Doc! Doc! I'm sorry, doc, I am. I'm just cold, doc. I'm sorry."

And that's when Dr. Salim noticed Sascha Coleman was wearing a very nice winter coat. Thick wool with a hood lined with white, soft fur. A hood you could cinch tightly to keep out the cold air.

Dr. Salim stepped up to the door. "You stole my coat? That's what you wanted all this time? My coat?"

"I tell you Doc! I'm sorry, doc, I am. I'm just cold, doc. I'm sorry."

Officer Mesk asked, "Is that your coat, Dr. Salim? Did she steal your coat?"

"Yes, it is, Officer. I think that is what she has wanted all this time."

"Doc! I'm sorry, doc. It's just so cold, doc. I'm sorry."

Officer Mesk pulled keys from her belt and reached into the police car. "Please remain still, Ms. Coleman."

"What are you doing, Officer?" Dr. Salim asked.

"I'm going to have her take off and return your coat," she replied without turning her head.

"No," Dr. Salim said. "Forget it. Please. Let her have it. She's right—it's very cold."

§ § §

Within the hour, Sascha had been driven to the police station, a statement taken, and fingerprinted. An officer took her in an elevator down to the jail rooms and her handcuffs removed. She was placed in a large holding cell, at least 50 feet long and 25 feet wide. A dozen or more women sat upright or sprawled about, some on benches along the walls, others on hard metal chairs. Most of them kept to themselves. One group of four women sat in one corner huddled together, laughing and talking in hushed whispers like they were actually enjoying themselves. There was an open toilet located in another back corner with a roll of toilet paper stuck on the floor next to it. No one sat near that area. The overhead florescent lights were all on and too bright.

The barred door of the cell opened automatically a few seconds

after they stepped up to it. The officer gently shoved Sascha in and the door shut with a loud clang behind her, locking her in with the rest.

Sascha sat herself down on an open bench. She pulled the winter coat tight around her body. The outside cold had worked its way down into the jails. Sascha took a quick glance around the room, then leaned her head back against the cement wall and closed her eyes.

She hadn't heard the four women approach her until one said, "I think that coat's my size, bitch."

Sascha opened one eye and saw them standing in front of her.

"What?" she mumbled.

"I said I think that coat's going to fit me just right, shit head."

"What—this coat?" Sascha replied.

"Give me that damn coat, bitch." The very large woman held out an extremely fat hand. A tattoo of a snake wound about her arm, from her wrist to her bicep, red blood dripping from the serpent's fanged mouth. She was wearing hot pink-rimmed sunglasses. "Give it to me or I'm taking it."

Sascha took another look at the woman and the three crowded behind her in forceful unity. She slowly took off the coat, then rolled it into a ball and tossed it to the woman. "Here," she said flippantly. "Take the dang, raggedy thing. It ain't keeping me warm anyway."

Then she closed her eyes again and feigned sleep until she heard the group laugh and shuffle back to their spot in the back corner. Sascha pulled her arms tighter across her chest and tried to stay warm.

GARBAGE SOUP

Based on the fable “Stone Soup”: Three hungry soldiers set up camp in the town square of an impoverished village. They boil water in a large cauldron and explain to the curious and hungry villagers that they have a magic stone that will make a wonderful soup for their dinner. Oh, but if only they had a bit of onion or carrot or meat the soup would be even more luscious, the soldiers tell the villagers! Each of the villagers offers a small contribution to the soup pot in exchange for a bowl of soup. Together, they create a soup that becomes a feast for all.

The moral of the fable is: By working together a greater good can be achieved.

We should stop here, Mommy.”
“Well, it’s as good a place as any.” The woman sighed, peering over the girl’s uncovered head to take a look around. Lord, she was getting taller every day!

The sun was starting to go down. Only a few golden rays reached where they stood. It was dark and shadowy under the freeway overpass, but there weren’t too many cars on the road and it was the rush hour. That was a good sign. Most likely there would be even less traffic later that night. And that meant less noise, fewer bothersome lights.

Dust floated down over the edge of the overpass, shimmering briefly in the last of the fading light. Maybe they would have a peaceful night’s rest. That hadn’t always been the case over the last six months, so she was grateful. Who could have imagined such a simple, little thing—like a quiet night of sleep—would mean so much to them?

The woman felt the beginning of the evening chill in the air. With a weary sigh, she reached down to tuck the bottom of the hooded sweatshirt into her faded jeans and pulled the down jacket’s Velcro strap tighter around her neck to keep out the coming cold. Along with

the long johns under her pants, thick socks, hiking boots, green wool cap hiding her ears and long brown hair, she was in full outdoor garb. These were some of the last clothes she still held onto from “before”.

Before the divorce, the anger, the legal battles and legal fees, the tears, the short-lived studio apartment, and the pain. Before she and Rose ended up on the street.

The last time she wore these clothes they most likely were camping and having a good time. It was probably at Big Sur, which was one of their favorite spots. How ironic, she thought, back then being outdoors meant they were on vacation! That seemed like a long, long time ago—another lifetime. Now Lydia wore the outfit all the time, the growing number of dirty spots proved that. For some reason she was always cold now, always.

Lydia stole a glance at her daughter, Rose. A blue denim jacket over her grey hooded sweatshirt, the faded jeans and black street boots made Rose look just like any other teenager in the world. Her medium length strawberry blond hair was tucked into a red, knitted scarf draped around her neck. No make-up, but Rose’s cheeks were a healthy pink color. The girl didn’t need the make-up anymore anyway. Rose wasn’t much different from any other kid, she just happened to be living on the street with her mother.

At that thought, Lydia felt a moment of deep sadness. The sadness quickly became a pang of desperation and then the sudden flash of the dangerous precipice to losing total control. With silent resolve she suppressed those feelings again, and did so almost before the thought registered in her mind about needing to do so. No, she couldn’t afford to lose control, not again, not ever. What would become of Rose? Of them? And in her heart of hearts Lydia really did believe that someday things would work out, really—it was just that “someday” was taking much longer than expected.

“Are you hungry, baby?” Lydia asked Rose, caressing her cheek with a grimy hand. There was dirt under every fingernail. Once upon a time they were polished and colored. But now the polish remaining was dull shards of jagged, rust-colored streaks.

"Yes, mamma, I am sorta hungry tonight," the young girl replied, resting her cheek softly against her mother's cold touch. She reached up and covered her mother's hands with her own. Neither of them had eaten much over the last three days and her empty stomach proved that.

"Let's do the soup tonight, see how that comes out. If it works, that ought to fill us right up and take away the chill. Come on, let's."

Lydia pushed the shopping cart deeper into the shadows and stopped at a large metal garbage can standing away from the concrete wall of the overpass. Weak entrails of gray smoke seeped from the top and swirled away.

Rose peered inside the can, keeping her hands back to avoid contact with the potentially hot metal. Bright red embers smoldered amid the blackened, charred wood and melted, but still recognizable, aluminum cans and broken glass. A partially melted doll's head somehow survived the last fire, a tiny patch of red, curly hair still attached in defiance. Half of the doll's bright red smile gaped sickly from the distorted face.

"Somebody's fire," Lydia claimed.

She pointed to a jumble of garbage bags and a few pieces of folded cardboard a few feet away. A dirty, plastic milk carton half-filled with liquid, water maybe, and a short stack of yellowed newspapers stood amongst the tied bags. "Looks like their stuff is still here. They'll be back."

Rose moved away from the garbage can. She scanned the area. "There's a lot of other stuff around here, too. I bet there'll be plenty of folks here later."

The woman nodded; Rose was probably right. Lydia picked out the piles of junk scattered about. *Well*, she chuckled to herself, *what most people would think were piles of junk*. These things were the few and precious belongings of the homeless, the transient, the needy, the hobos, bums, whatever the nom de jour was for them. She identified these belongings right away—she pushed her own about all day, her things and Rose's.

The two moved further under the concrete structure, finally picking

a fairly clear area just about in the middle of the overpass. Here they parked their shopping cart.

At least five other makeshift resting spots—Rose liked to call them nests—were positioned around them. Close, but not too close. Other nests were strewn about. Most had the requisite plastic milk jug for drinking water and stacks of newspaper. Not that most of these folks really kept up with current events, but newspaper was a good insulator for thin pants and torn coats. It also slowed water from leaking into used, holey shoes for a little while. Some of them had blankets, folded up for the most part. Lydia was fairly surprised these were left unattended and hoped that meant these folks were trusting, and prayed that they were also kind. Many of these things could be easily obtained from recycle bins and garbage cans, but sometimes it was a whole lot easier to just take them from your neighbor.

Rose was right. There would be a number of other homeless folks to keep them company, maybe share soup with tonight.

Lydia and Rose began the now familiar task of clearing debris from their spot, moving small rocks, bits of broken glass away in silence. Each had their assigned tasks, learned well from daily experience over their homeless travels. Lydia pulled a folded piece of cardboard from the bottom section of the cart. Once a packing crate for a bookshelf, the cardboard was thick and still intact, even though it had been used many times and the creases from the folds were torn in a few places.

She handed the cardboard to Rose, who unfolded it on the ground. Lydia then removed a blue moving tarpaulin from the cart and spread that over the box. It was her prized possession! A month ago, during a late summer rain, she forced herself to ask two men waiting out the rain in the back of an almost empty moving van if they had an old tarp she could have. They never said a word, but just handed over a tarp. Since then, Lydia and Rose put the thick, quilt-like, moving tarp to good use, especially as the fall, with its dark, cold nights, came upon them quickly. Lydia vowed to protect this tarp with her life. She knew it protected theirs.

“Rose, you better start looking for some wood to get the fire going. We want to be sure the blaze is nice and warm before sunset.” Lydia

again scanned the area. "And keep a look out for a can we might use for the soup."

Rose set off through the temporary nests and scraggly brush of the homeless site. She had done this many times over the last few months and, each time, luck had been on her side. But since a number of other people already set up residence at this spot, wood scraps for a fire might be hard to come by. She might have to do a bit of walking to find enough. Yet, she felt good and hopeful about the thought of soup, and fully expected things would work out okay.

Ah, the soup! Just the mention of the soup awoke great hunger pangs in both of them. And of course the soup was always a great adventure for them, too! A mystery story, with neither able to guess the outcome until the drama played out. Sometimes the outcome miraculously appeared, as Rose liked to put it, and they might spend a luxurious evening in their outdoor campsite with newfound friends. Other nights they went to bed with their hunger pangs and the echo of jeers and threats to keep them company, a reminder of the hard life they would awaken to in the morning. The play always had a surprise ending, sometimes good, but not always. What would happen this time?

Against the wall of the overpass, Lydia found a number of large stones, most likely cleared away from some of the sites. Turning back to retrieve her shopping cart that was still laden with a number of their belongings, she returned and placed two of the larger stones gently on top. Lydia wheeled back to the site chosen for the night.

For a good half-hour, Lydia went back and forth, setting more large stones into a circular pattern near their nest. The center of the pattern was large enough for a nice fire and the stones tall enough to prop the soup can on for cooking, once they found one. She promised herself, again, that one of these days she would try to get hold of a large pot so they wouldn't have to scrounge around for one all of the time.

When Lydia was satisfied with her stone fire circle, she got up and searched about for water. A faucet had to be nearby, what with everyone else's water jugs, and soon found one leading from the end of the overpass structure. She squatted down to get a better look. The

handle was missing but someone affixed a rusty old pipe wrench to the end with black electrician's tape. Half of that handle had broken off, but there was still enough to turn the water on. About six inches of old black hose connected to the spigot. Lydia straightened up to see if Rose had come back.

There was her daughter, dragging a large tree branch behind her. The branch wasn't very thick, but still had a number of small, thin arms shooting off the main stem. On these Rose laid a piece of cardboard. On top rode the bits and pieces of wood she managed to find. Rose also stumbled upon part of a pallet crate, which still had a few fairly large pieces of wood to burn, although they would have to somehow find a way to pry them apart.

Lydia wasn't sure if this would be enough firewood for the soup, but they were still lucky to have found this much. The magic of the soup would have to do for the rest. She watched Rose drag the entire load to their nest.

"Fantastic, Rose," Lydia exclaimed, as she began piling the wood next to the fire circle. "See if you can break some of these small branches up. Use the big branch to pry apart the pallet. Just place the thicker end between the boards, keep your weight on the other end, and push down—that should work. I think I saw a can back up the road as we passed—I'll go check it out."

As she walked away, Lydia shrugged, still thinking about how nice it would be to own a large soup pot to use. Unless by some crazy chance they were very, very lucky, that wasn't likely to happen. Still, they always managed to find a trash can clean enough for the soup. In fact, cleaning out the can had become a major part of making the soup, the start of the whole drama. Act 1.

There were a few garbage cans under the overpass, but most of these either had been used for making a fire the night before, evidenced by the smoke seeping out of them, or were too rusted and dirty to use for the soup. Lydia pushed her cart back along the short path she and Rose used earlier. Stepping from the shadows of the overpass, she noticed two men leaning against the side of the rising concrete structure, almost hidden by a small Manzanita bush.

One was asleep, his arms folded across his chest. His tattered blue coat was partially unzipped and revealed a dirty, hooded sweatshirt beneath. An empty pint bottle lay next to him in the dirt. His right hand was wrapped in a soiled ace bandage held together with a large silver safety pin. If it was there to help keep a wound clean, the wrap was no longer doing its job.

The other man wore a greasy San Francisco Giants baseball cap. A scraggly, peppery beard covered the lower half of his face. He stared at her and took a long pull from a cigarette. Lydia caught his eye as she passed and slowed momentarily.

"I'm looking for a nice garbage can. I want to make some hot soup for the cold night ahead. There's nothing like hot soup to warm a person's soul up." Lydia nodded and smiled as she spoke to the smoking man, then moved on without waiting for a reply.

Lydia pushed her grocery cart further ahead, finally coming upon the can she spotted earlier, hoping with all hope that the can would be good enough to use. She didn't want to spend a lot of time searching—night was already fast approaching. If it became too dark it would be impossible to find a good can at all and they would have to give up on the soup for tonight. But Lydia had a good feeling about this night.

The garbage can looked pretty good on the outside. It was lying on its side, partially covered by a few pages of brittle yellow newspaper. A pile of dry leaves spilled out of the open end. Lydia kicked the newspaper away and lifted the bottom end of the can, spilling its contents onto the ground. Nothing but more leaves, paper, a couple of plastic soda bottles, dirt, and dust.

She set the can back upright and peered in. A quick smile crossed her lips when she saw the can looked fairly clean inside. Thankfully there wasn't any moldy garbage or dead rodents, covered in maggots or other bugs, like the one they found the last time they tried to make the soup. Even the outside appeared in good shape, rust kept away by a thick layer of dark red paint covering the lower half of the metal can.

Nope, this will do just fine, she thought to herself.

Lydia pushed her cart against the can and jammed a couple of rocks against the back wheels to hold the cart steady. Bending down

to lift the empty can, she almost lost control as it slipped against the edge of the metal cart. By shifting her weight just so Lydia was able to flop the can into the cart, top-side down. The bottom half stuck up, but she only had a little ways to go to bring it back to their site. Lydia saw it was in really good condition: very little rust, if any, and no holes—perfect to withstand the fire’s heat and hold in the soup!

Lydia whistled, mostly air, as she returned to the site with the soup pot. The night was shaping up well. This time when Lydia passed the two lounging men, both of them were smoking.

“Whatcha got there?” the man who had been asleep earlier asked her. She stopped to answer.

“I’ve got me a fine soup pot,” Lydia replied.

“Soup pot?” he exclaimed. “Looks like a garbage can to me. I can’t rightly recall the last time I had me a good bowl of soup out of a trash can. Can you, Jack? When was that—our last prime rib dinner at Le Soupa de Trash Can?”

He poked his partner in the ribs with his bandaged hand, gave a loud laugh and winked at Lydia, flashing a smile that was missing a large front tooth.

“Yes,” Lydia replied, stroking the bottom of the can. “It’s a garbage can now, but after my daughter and I clean it all out and get it good and hot, we’ll make our world famous home-cooked soup in it. Once you’ve smelled the fragrant soup you’ll forget all about this being a garbage can! And if you taste the hot soup you’ll think you’re sitting and eating right in the middle of the dining room of the finest restaurant in town.”

With that, Lydia moved on again without waiting for another reply. The men’s gazes weighed on her back as she pushed her cart and soup pot away.

Heading back to Rose, Lydia noticed a few more people had returned back to their nests, including children as well. Most stood or sat around while others were getting ready for the evening, spreading out cardboard, blankets, and putting sweaters and coats on. All of these people noticed her and her strange collection as she passed by, but few said anything to her. To the ones that did ask, Lydia gave the

same reply or explanation. The can was just a garbage can now, but wait until the wonderful hot and fragrant soup was made. Of course, some of the children just couldn't let her pass without a few questions and smiles and giggles.

"What's the garbage can for? What's your name? How are you going to make soup in that thing? What kind of soup, chicken noodle or—ugh!—tomato? How can you make soup in a garbage can—are you magical?"

For these children, Lydia stopped and let them gather around her. Then she placed her hands on the garbage can sitting in her grocery cart, stroking and petting it as if it was a very special object come to life. The finest soup pot in the world. In a voice loud enough so not only the kids could hear but also any adult listening in on their conversation, as most of them were, she patiently answered every one of their questions.

"Yes, this will be a very special soup and to be cooked in this very special soup pot. But first, Rose and I will need to clean this can up and scrub all of the dirt out so our soup will be hot and wonderful. It will smell like the best soup you've ever smelled before and will taste like no other soup you've ever tasted. And when you sleep tonight, your dreams will be filled with the smell and taste of the soup, just like your full bellies will be."

Her responses elicited more questions from the children.

"What kind of soup is it? How will you eat the soup? Will we get to have some soup?" Again, Lydia answered, her voice loud and clear.

"Rose and I don't know what kind of soup we will make yet. We never know until it's all cooked. We do have some special things to put into it, you'll see! And we'll eat ours with a bowl and a spoon. How will you eat yours? We'll be making a great big pot of soup, so perhaps there will be plenty if you should like to share it with us. But now I have to go or we won't have time to make the soup!"

And this time she pushed on, back to Rose and their site. Some of the children followed, chattering quietly, but excitedly, behind her.

Rose stacked all of the wood she brought back, including the pallet board pieces she separated. The stack was pretty high—at least high

enough to build a hot fire to heat the water, surely enough to get it boiling.

"Come on, Rosie," Lydia said to her when she stepped up with the cart and can. "Come with me to start cleaning this pot. Hopefully we can get some of these kids to help."

Together the two of them pushed the cart and 'soup pot' back over to the faucet Lydia located earlier.

Lydia turned the spigot on and wet down the outside of the can first. Using old rags, the two of them scrubbed good and hard. Much of the dirt and grime came off with each swipe. The caked on patches took a good deal more muscle, but with time the outside of the garbage can began to look much better.

A group of about a half dozen children came over to watch them, soon followed by a smaller group of adults.

Rose smiled a "Hi all!" at the kids and Lydia gave just a smile and a grunt to the adults. Neither of them stopped cleaning the can, however. Finally, one of the young boys came up and asked if he could help.

"Why do you want to help?" Rose asked him, loudly enough for all to hear. "You don't even know what we're doing."

She reached deep into the can to clean out more of the dirt. Lydia rinsed out the spot Rose just swiped.

"What ARE you doing?" one of the adults asked, as Lydia threw the boy a rag.

"Why, we're cleaning this-here soup pot for tonight," Lydia answered, sweeping her hair away from her face. "Use that rag to help clean up this pot, boy, and you can share in the soup tonight, IF you're allowed to."

The young boy looked over at a woman standing in the group nearby. His silent plea was answered with a quick nod. He smiled and began to help Rose rub down the can.

"Soup, in a garbage can?" another adult inquired. "I'm not sure if that's a very good idea."

"You eat soup out of a pot, don't you?" Lydia asked him. "Well,

once we get this can clean enough it will be the best and biggest soup pot in the county." She smiled at the boy helping them. "Good job, son, you're really cleaning that can up good. The soup's going to be extra savory tonight!"

"What kind of soup are you making?" a woman asked, the boy's mother.

"GARBAGE SOUP!" Lydia and Rose yelled with delight at the same time. "Great garbage soup!!!"

"Oooooooh!" The kids laughed and squealed. "We're not eating garbage soup!"

"Sounds a bit off," the woman replied.

"It's not really garbage soup because we use garbage," Rose explained. "We call it garbage soup because we use a special, cleaned out garbage can for our soup pot."

"It's really the best soup I've ever tasted," smiled Lydia, closing her eyes as if she were dreaming about the soup. "It tastes so wonderful, and it's good and hot, and the smells just enter your nose and fill-up your whole body! It will be the best soup you've ever tasted, too, you'll see if you share it with us!"

"Well, what's really in it?" Another man asked.

By that time, two other kids slipped in to help clean while Rose stood back and rinsed. Lydia was now free to face the group gathered 'round and answer their questions.

"You know, that's the funny part," Lydia replied. "The soup's never come out the same way twice. But it's always the best soup we've ever had. What do you like in your soup?"

"Hmmm, well, I like a bit of onion and ham in mine," the man replied. And you could tell by his wistful tone and the gleam in his eyes he was picturing a big, hot, steamy bowl of soup, flavored with bits of ham and chopped onion. "And maybe some celery!"

"That sounds good alright," Lydia responded. "I don't think we have any ham or onion OR celery tonight. But if YOU have any of that why don't you bring it on over and we'll add it to the pot and you can share it with us. It's going to be great!"

"Well," the man said. "I do have a bit of sliced ham from a sandwich I got over behind the deli today, but I was going to share that with my boy there tonight."

"Don't think about it for another second," Lydia replied, clapping him good-naturedly on the shoulder. "Bring the boy too, there'll be plenty! Just bring your ham sandwich and a big bowl over in about an hour and we'll add it right to the soup. That ham will add great flavor and the bread can serve to help thicken it up. And don't forget your spoons!"

"There's tomato in that sandwich, too!" The man said, smacking his lips joyfully.

"Even better!" Lydia smiled. "We'll add it all!"

"Add it all to what?" Another man spoke up.

It was the sleeping man with the bandaged hand, come over to check out the newcomers and their crazy soup. He glanced over at the folk gathering around Rose and Lydia and the garbage can. Or was that a soup pot? The man shook his head at Lydia to let her know he thought the whole idea was wacko.

"Sounds like all you got so far is half a ham sandwich and a dirty old garbage can. Please tell me and everyone else around here how that becomes the greatest soup ever made?"

He looked again at all the others, trying to get them to join him in his disbelief.

"Well, first of all, take a look at that dirty old garbage can." Lydia pointed back at the cleaning kids. She called to Rose, "Rose, stand that pot up and rinse it off so these folks can see our newest soup pot!"

Rose did as Lydia asked and with one final splash of water on the outside of the can she rinsed the last bit of dirt away. The garbage can was much cleaner than before. Maybe even clean enough to make soup in it!

"Now see, sir, you thought this pot wasn't going to work out, but it sure has become a great soup pot, don't you think?! Imagine that pot filled with hot, thick flavorful soup! Won't that take the chill from the night air tonight?!" Lydia eyed the man with a smile. "And, of course, we hope you can come share it with us?"

"Well," the man replied. "I'm not sure what you and your kid are, well, cooking up, so to say. Well, I don't know, but, aw what the hell, that can maybe WOULD make a great mess of soup. But I don't really have much to add to it."

"Anything you have will help. Every little bit adds flavor to a great pot of soup!" Lydia told him and the others around her nodded in agreement. "What exactly DO you have to add to the soup?"

"Let's see," the man thought out loud, scratching his head with his bandaged hand. "I have a half a bag of potato chips, barbecue, and most of a green salad from Wendy's. You think that will help?"

"Will that help?" Lydia exclaimed. "My-oh-my! That, added to the ham sandwich, added to the greatest hot and steaming pot of soup ever cooked will be great! Can you just imagine how thick the soup will get from those chips and how the salt and barbecue seasonings will flavor the savory broth? And the veggies from the salad will add even more flavor and fiber and vitamins and all that good stuff that we all need."

The man's gap-toothed smile showed he had changed his mind. "Well, I guess my friend Jack might have something to throw in, too, if that's okay with you two."

With a nod and a smile back from Lydia, he went off to retrieve his treasures.

"This soup is going to be the best batch yet!" Rose expressed with glee. "What about you other kids, do you all want to share soup with us tonight? It's such a great big pot we'll have enough to feed a whole city! We'll eat soup 'til we burst!"

"Hey, I think we have a box of leftover Kentucky Fried Chicken. We can add that, can't we?"

"Sam, you better ask mom before you promise that! That was supposed to be for our supper."

"Well, now we can have wonderful, hot soup and THAT can be our supper. I'm gonna go ask her right now." Sam threw down his cleaning rag and ran off to ask his mom.

"Mmmmm, chicken would make the soup almost too good to be true. That, plus all of the salad veggies, ham, tomato, and the barbecue

potato chips. I can almost taste it already!" Lydia closed her eyes and licked her lips. "Come on, Rose, let's get this clean soup pot over to the fire and get it filled with water to boil!"

"Well, now, here ma'am," the man with the sandwich cut in. "Please let me and a few of the guys here carry this heavy soup pot over to your fire. And some of you kids, start filling your buckets and jugs with water to fill up this pot once it's set in place!"

"And don't forget." Lydia called out just as everyone started to move. "Let's all share in the soup tonight! So bring your best bowl and your biggest spoon when the soup's done. And bring whatever you have to add to the pot as soon as you can so all of the flavors can cook and bubble and meld together while the soup starts getting hot! In about an hour or so we're going to have the greatest pot of soup ever made, I swear I'm sure about that!"

Soon the men placed the soup pot atop the circle of firestones. Many jugs and buckets of water later, the pot was about two-thirds full of water. More than enough to feed all of the people now congregated under the freeway overpass for the night, PLUS any friends that stopped by!

There were at least fifteen adults in the makeshift campground and another ten children. Most had by now set-up their nests for the evening, spreading cardboard and blankets around, bundling up in sweatshirts and coats, getting ready to eat whatever meager supplies they had for dinner. Most usually had very little to eat.

But that night, there was a different feeling running through the camp: a different smell, a tingle—and all because of the soup! People who wouldn't normally have a word to say to one another were now talking about the soup, what was in it, what they were going to add to it, how good it was going to be. Each of them had a different, special version of the soup in their mind, perhaps some remembrance of steaming hot soup filling a small hungry belly, of sitting around the table with family and friends, of home. They each smiled when they thought of that soup.

So, it was no problem for each of them to find some small tidbit,

some morsel, some leftover to add to the pot. They would all share and there would be more than enough for everyone!

Lydia and Rose started the fire under the pot with small broken branches, bits of scrap wood, and wadded up strips of newspaper. When the smaller kindling caught fire, they carefully added larger branches and a few of the pallet board pieces, saving enough to keep the fire going for some time.

The bandaged man's friend, Jack, came along and added to the woodpile, asking humbly if his contribution was enough so that he could share in the soup as well. After talking to Lydia for a minute, she also discovered he had half a bag of carrots wrapped up in his blanket. That, too, went into the pot, cut up into scrumptious chunks.

Eventually, one by one, all of the adults came over, some with their children tagging along shyly, adding whatever they were able. While smiling and talking gaily with Rose and Lydia they added so many things!

One woman had a bag of French fries from Burger King. Another had a large onion that was quickly chopped and added. One family of four brought over a plastic baggie full of leftover spaghetti from a free lunch they received behind a café that afternoon. The ham sandwich went in, as did the salad and chips. A small cheer went up throughout the camp as the box of half-eaten Kentucky Fried Chicken was ceremoniously dumped into the pot!

Rose pulled a very large wooden spoon from somewhere within their cart of belongings, almost big enough to be called a paddle, which they used a few times before to stir soup. It had a long handle that could reach down into the belly of the pot and a thick round head to stir all of the soup fixings. She made a great show of presenting the spoon to Lydia, who, in turn, solemnly dipped the spoon into the pot and began a slow, even stirring.

She smiled at everyone and called, "Soup's on!" Many of the adults, and all of the kids, clapped with glee.

First, a faint wisp of steam floated off the top of the liquid. Then, a few minutes later, tiny little bubbles formed on the outside ring of

the soup, close along the edge of the soup pot. The bubbles began to get a little bit bigger and more steam rose off the soup! The cooking process was luxuriously slow and the anticipation wonderful! More wood was placed under the pot and into the fire.

And as the soup began bubbling even stronger, more people came over to add to the pot.

Three potatoes were diced and dropped in next. A man dug into his pockets and pulled out a handful of salt, pepper and ketchup packets which he opened and added. He threw the empty packets into the fire, causing it to sparkle brightly to match their own growing excitement. A young man offered a defrosted bag of peas and carrots and emptied these contents into the soup pot. He smiled at Rose shyly, and then walked back into the shadows, backing out of the fire's glare. Another man gently opened the plastic top of a small Tupperware bowl and three-bean salad tumbled into the pot, kidney beans and green beans and garbanzo beans, all in a thick Italian dressing. Lydia gave the man a quick hug for this treasure and he proudly stepped back smiling, joining in with the others now milling about the soup pot.

Every once in a while someone would take a step closer to the pot, adult and child alike, to peer over the edge, take a quick look in, and breathe in the deep smell of the broth. Then they would smile at Rose or Lydia, giggle and shrug their shoulders, at once sheepish and excited, and quickly slide back into the group, where they joined in the conversation about soup.

Because that's what everyone was talking about: soup!

They talked about recipes for fantastic bowls of soup and the great smells of so many different soups. Some spoke about how good soup was for you. Others reminisced about sitting around having soup with family and friends. All of them agreed nothing felt better than a cold body filling up on a bowl of good, hot, soup. For a little while, with the pot bubbling away, melding all of the different, individual ingredients they all added into a thicker, richer, more flavorful soup—their dinner!—they forgot about their homelessness, their needs, their fears, and were cheered.

And how was the soup coming?

"Oh, it's going to be soup in just a little while!" Lydia called out, still stirring the pot contents gently. "It's hot and getting thicker and starting to smell soooo good. Come and smell and see!"

They all did, gathering even closer, taking a peek, stealing a whiff. It was all so good!

And still more came to add to the soup. Here was a pack of hot dogs, cut into small chunks. A woman dropped in a bag of pre-cut cabbage originally intended for coleslaw. This one added two whole tomatoes. Then, an older gentleman walked up with a small parcel in brown plain paper.

"I was going to feed this to the dog," he mumbled, opening the package. Inside was a savory ham bone with small chunks of ham still clinging to the bone. He lowered it into the soup and a resounding cheer erupted from the gathering. Men and women shook his hands and patted him on the back. Lydia even gave him a small peck on the cheek, which startled him while his eyes shone bright.

"Now, we just have to cook this for a while," Lydia exclaimed with a big smile. "And when it's done, everyone better get in line and bring your biggest bowl, because there's enough soup here for an army. What a great soup dinner we will all have tonight!"

By then, everyone had added something and all were ready to partake in the hot soup when Lydia told them it was ready. Everyone could tell from the thickness of the broth and the smells that the soup truly was going to be the best soup they had ever had!

So they waited and talked and smiled to each other, kindred souls for at least one night, one night of shared soup.

Some of the kids raced around the campsite, too happy and excited to keep still. Someone had opened a few cans of warm beer and these were being passed amongst some of the adults. Conversation and laughter grew. Some of the adults even began an impromptu dance along the edge of the cooking fire. Lydia clapped her hands in time against the stirring spoon. Rose joined in, dancing happily with the shy young man who had contributed the bag of peas and carrots. These folks hadn't shared such sounds of delight and feeling of happiness for some time and definitely never in this makeshift homeless camp.

Lydia and Rose's eye met as mother stirred and daughter danced. They smiled knowingly at each other and their smiles reached out deeply for one another. They knew the soup magic worked again and they honestly believed this was going to be the best soup ever made. They couldn't wait to serve it up and to eat their fill along with all of the others.

"Okay, everybody," Lydia called out again above the noise and frivolity. "I'm going to taste the soup and see if it's ready!"

Everyone gathered even closer around Lydia and the pot. She brought the large wooden spoon out of the soup pot, tapping it loudly against the side, like a drum, until she could feel everyone bursting with anticipation. Then she slowly dipped the spoon into the boiling soup and, grasping it strongly with both hands, brought it back up slowly to her lips.

Lydia smiled then blew onto the spoon. With a momentary glance at everyone as they shuffled ever more tightly around the hot pot of soup, she tipped the spoon into her mouth, closed her eyes and swallowed. Lydia's smile grew. Then, her eyes flew open wide and she laughed out:

"SOUP'S ON, EVERYBODY!"

And just at that same exact moment brilliant, bright lights flashed from the overpass, settling on the group gathered near the fire.

Four police cars and a police van swung off the overpass in unison, with loud, metallic crunches as each vehicle popped up over the curb. The cars rambled down the short embankment and through the campsite, quickly swinging around the group of homeless people and surrounding them and their cooking fire. The headlights from the vehicles were glaring and hideous. Flashing police lights from two of the squad cars turned on, rotating and creating an almost alien atmosphere.

The people of the encampment instinctively huddled together, trying to do so while avoiding the fire and the hot can.

Police in riot gear descended from all of the vehicles.

One clicked on a megaphone and, directing his booming voice at the crowd, yelled, "THIS IS A RESTRICTED AREA. YOU ARE ORDERED TO

EXIT FROM THIS CITY AREA IMMEDIATELY. WE HAVE WARNED YOU BEFORE. PLEASE LEAVE THIS AREA IMMEDIATELY."

The policemen moved in, pushing the people away from the fire and separating them from one another. They grunted and swore as they drove the people away, poking some with their riot clubs to move them along.

An older man, the one who offered the succulent ham bone, was pushed a little too roughly and he tripped and fell to his knees. This prompted one of the officers to kick him in the ribcage with a heavy boot. The fallen man grunted, but heaved himself up before another blow could come his way. He scrambled off, clutching his side.

All of the others scattered in confusion.

Again the officer with the megaphone commanded, "MOVE OUT QUICKLY. NOW. THIS IS NOT A PUBLIC CAMPING LOCATION. MOVE OUT OR YOU WILL BE TAKEN INTO CUSTODY FOR TRESPASSING. MOVE OUT."

The officer walked up to the bubbling pot of soup. The large spoon was forgotten in the pot when Lydia and Rose were hustled off with the rest of their homeless friends. The officer grabbed the spoon handle, dipped the head into the hot, thick soup, and brought the spoon up to his nose for a smell. He breathed deeply. In disgust, he threw the spoon and its contents onto the ground. The treasured spoon split right down the middle and broke into two perfectly equal halves.

"What the hell is this?" The officer barked in revulsion. "Did they make this crap out of garbage?"

The officer raised his right boot onto the tip of the hot garbage can and shoved with all of his might. The can and its contents came crashing to the ground. Thick, luxurious soup spilled into the fire where it bubbled and boiled briefly, sending thick wafts of rich-smelling steam up into the night air, until the cooking fire smothered out. The campsite would have been pitch-black if not for the flashlights of the police officers and the grotesque, swirling headlights from the police cars.

§ § §

Later that night, two dark figures walked into the dark, quiet clearing under the overpass.

One of them, a woman, pushed a cart full of personal possessions to the spot where the cooking fire had been. She stopped at the garbage can, once full of hot soup, now lying on its side in dirt and mud. Sighing, she grabbed the collars of her dirty down jacket with her grimy hands and pulled the Velcro straps together tighter. The night grew suddenly much, much colder.

She reached into her cart and after a brief moment pulled out a large, wooden bowl. In quiet dignity she knelt and, using her hands, began to scrape up soup ingredients puddled along the inside of the can and also on the ground at the can's lip. The other, a younger woman in a knitted scarf, stooped and began to pick up small morsels in the dark.

As they gathered up these scraps, the older woman found the ham bone still with bits of gristle, fat and meat clinging to the bone. She tenderly wiped dirt and grime from it before placing the bone in her soup bowl. Tears filled her eyes as the bowl slowly filled.

She moved on her knees back to the can. The young one held the large bowl securely on the ground near the lip of the cold garbage can. The other moved to the back end and gently lifted, pouring the last remaining trickle of soup into the bowl.

At least Rose would have something to eat tonight.

To purchase

Invisible Society Fables

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*Please note a portion of the profits from each sale of this book
will be donated to*

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Eternal gratitude and much love to my wife, Sue, who read, reread, and edited so many story iterations and gave me the final brilliant recommendation to tie these stories together. Because of that we were able to reveal how homelessness creates its own subtle subcultures in seemingly disparate and non-connected environments.

To my many friends, family members and co-workers, with whom I shared many of these stories and received invaluable feedback in return. You have all added a piece of yourself to these final fables and for this I am so appreciative.

To all the selfless people who work directly to help the homeless, on the street, in clinics, in shelters, churches, food banks, and everywhere on the front lines, you are all heroes. And to those countless folks, like me, who work behind the scenes in support of the effort, on budgets and reports, on databases and paper, on laws and policies, creating and maintaining the infrastructure to continue service, you are vital and important. Homelessness was supposed to be a short-term problem, but we have all learned otherwise, and we keep our shoulders to the grindstone, fighting the good fight, supporting each other along the way. I am proud to count myself as a friend among you.

Dear readers,

I hope you enjoy this book. I am indebted to you all for allowing my perspectives and perceptions into your life and for letting me share my simple message about homeless people: they are us.

About the Author



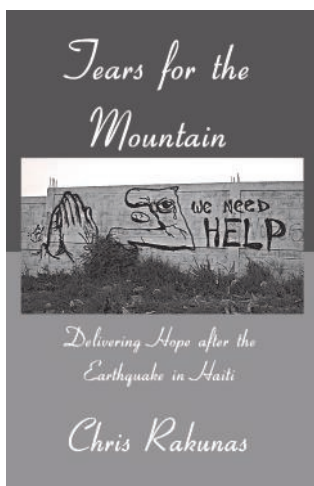
In his spare time, Phil Canalin works in public health finance, most recently for the noted Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless Program. He also loves to write fiction, short stories, poetry, and children's stories. This is his first published short story collection based on his rare opportunities to observe, work with, and speak to homeless people and the dedicated people that serve and care for them. Phil's first published novel is titled *Slow Pitch Softball – More Than Just A Game* (Black Rose Writing, 2013). He also has a published children's book, *Just Hug A Bubble!*, and collaborated on a cookbook project with his wife, Sue, *Dinner at the Sonneman's*. Phil resides in Alameda, CA with Sue, his high-school sweetheart and wife of 34 years. Daughters, Jessica and Kelsey, live in Hawaii and NorCal, respectively, both enviably facing the beach. Phil grew up loving Aesop's Fables and The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show's Fractured Fairy Tales and Aesop & Son.

Check out Phil, his blog and other writing projects at

<http://www.philcanalin.com>

and look for his next publication!

Also by Divertir Publishing



Right there, on the gray cinderblock wall, was a jet-black piece of graffiti that I couldn't quite understand at first. Miriam must have caught the look on my face because she explained. "It's a map of Haiti," she said. It made sense suddenly. The map of Haiti had an eye placed in it so that it looked like a face. Coming down from the eye was a single giant tear drop. "Haiti is weeping."

On Tuesday, January 12th 2010, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake shook the island nation of Haiti. The United States Agency for International Development estimated the death toll to be somewhere between 46,000 and 85,000 people, with 220,000 injured and over 1.5 million homeless. Many organizations, both from the U.S. and abroad, responded to the appeal for humanitarian aid.

Dr. Stephen Schroering and Chris Rakunas went to Haiti to deliver over 21,000 pounds of medical and surgical supplies to the New Life Children's Home in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and several other hospitals. In *Tears for the Mountain*, Chris recounts his mission to deliver these supplies to the earthquake-ravaged island nation. Chris discusses both the triumphs and heartbreaks of the trip, the problems with distributing aid in a nation lacking the most basic infrastructure, and his unexpected encounter with a notorious Haitian warlord.

A portion of the proceeds for this book will be donated to the New Life Children's Home in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Cold...Hungry...Ignored...Invisible.

In 2010, President Obama initiates his ten-year plan to end homelessness for all Americans. In 2012, HUD estimates 637,000 people experience homelessness on any given night in the USA. Today, we're making progress...right? But the issue's not going away any time soon.

Invisible Society Fables looks at homelessness, using the storylines and morals of classic childhood fables and converting them to contemporary tales of homelessness in a straightforward, respectful manner. Let these new fables show the ironies and intricacies of circumstance while gently reminding us that anyone can be homeless—neighbors, friends, family, me, you. Most passersby choose to ignore the homeless person huddled on the curb, moving swiftly past, avoiding eye contact, literally side-stepping any connection. In the end, who seeks to hide and who becomes invisible?

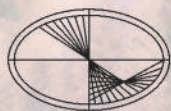
What People are Saying About Invisible Society Fables

"Phil Canalin's stories are heartfelt and real. They offer a glimpse into the realities of homelessness and illuminate the humanity of those who live it. This book is a must read for those who want to understand the experience of being homeless. Phil's stories and insights will also be invaluable and meaningful for the reader with more familiarity with homelessness and the people who live it."

Elizabeth Marlow, PhD, C-FNP, Executive Director & Co-Founder, The Gamble Institute—for parolees, by parolees (www.gambleinstitute.org).

"Phil Canalin's Invisible Society Fables captures the timeless lessons taught in classic fables of childhood but with a creative and valuable modern day twist. We see these lessons learned through the eyes of those many of us deem as invisible—the homeless. A heartwarming reminder of what keeps many of us as well as our homeless, individuals and families just like any of us, hopeful and resilient. These fables should be given to every child as a primer in teaching humanity, respect, and compassion for others, no matter where they may come from, look like or where they live."

Ravi Joshi, MS I Healthcare Management, Harvard School of Public Health.



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