

Dignity Village, Portland

by Nonnie Augustine

A cheap pocket knife was the only sharp I carried in my backpack and they allowed me that. The man with the pot tattoo on his neck said, "All of us here needs some type of knife. You gotta cut up your food. We don't mess with each other, though. Not like the street. You're gettin Barry's spot. It's a good one, near the toilets, but not too near so's you get the smell. Take a left once you pass the Community Center, that's that big tent down there, and keep going till you hit # 33. I'll stop by and see how's it's goin for ya, maybe. If you like. Some people don't like visiting, some do. Most do after they've been around us awhile. After they've seen how peaceful we are. After they get the wild out, settle some. If'n all goes fine, you got 60 days, then we meet up to talk about longer."

The blond lady elbowed him gently saying, "Okay, Carl, okay. We've yammered enough. She's worn-out. We gave her the rule sheet, checked her stuff, now let's let her get on to her space already. She'll either fit in or she won't. Go on, uh...Bonnie, right?"

"Connie, actually. No matter. Well, thanks. Maybe this will work out, eh?" My voice sounded rusted, gravelly.

After walking seven miles from downtown, the half-mile or so to "Barry's spot" was easy-peasy. My space, #33, was painted bright yellow. Inside was a single room with a bed, sheets, two blankets, and a propane heater. The door locked and the windows had flowery blue curtains. The plank floor was raised up off the ground and everything was dry. I was so sick of the rain and so, so, very wet. I wondered if the bed was Barry's, wondered if he'd died on it. I didn't care if he did. Not a bit. I turned the lock, closed the curtains, stripped, laid out my clothes to dry, got under the blankets, and

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slept until the next afternoon when pounding on the door woke me up. I wrapped a blanket around me and looked out the window. Carl. He had a cup of hot coffee and a jug of water for me. He was checking up, he said. No one had seen me in a day. Then he asked me if I was hungry. I was.

