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Continued from last page

weeks. It's his check day, you know."

"What about the Kid?" I asked.

"Don't you know? The Old Man killed him!"

"What do you mean?" I asked in great surprise.

"Well, if you ask me, the Kid is as good as dead. The way he's driving and drinking, he won't live until Christmas, if he lives three days. The Old Man killed him when he got that car for him."

Her brief and disinterested prophesy dumbfounded me. There was nothing more to say. I had heard a lot of tales on the library's courtyard, but this briefest one was unique. Though it implicated me in events that would inevitably lower the Kid into an early grave, it had the ring of—absolute truth.

But the Kid didn't die. Ten days later, on a trip to the library, I ran into him again. He was back on the streets, a pedestrian again. The Old Man was back, too, the Kid told me. When the Old Man's checks had come, he hadn't rented a house as he'd boasted of doing: he'd pulled one helluva drunk instead.

On the last day I'd seen them, just as the Old Man had predicted, the Kid had cruised the streets with the food-stamp blonde. That night, from a northern Dallas suburb where they'd stopped for a meal, she had called the police. She told them that the Kid had kidnapped her and was endangering her life with his driving style.

The police arrested the Kid, for public intoxication, he told me, but they wound up taking him to Parkland, not to jail, because of his arm. The Kid had gotten lucky, though, of course, he didn't see it that way. The police had impounded the car, and he hadn't seen it since.

Everybody in the wino crowd had heard about the caper by the time they and the Kid told it to me, and all of them assured me that the tale was true. But the Kid told a second story, which everybody regarded as merely a wino tale, because its opening was beyond belief.

The Kid claimed that four or five days after the incident with the food-stamp blonde he had persuaded a rental agency to loan him a second car, a white sedan of a Japanese make. He even claimed to have arranged for the car by himself.

Nobody believed any of that. The general consensus was that since the tale's opening was beyond belief, the rest of it was, too.

But I've checked the police records, and—believe it or not—it's no wino tale. The Kid's story is true.

The records show that a few days after the scene with the food-stamp blonde, driving towards Garland during a down-pour, the Kid, in a Japanese-made rental car, sideswiped another vehicle. The police were summoned, and just as in his pickup wreck, they found no reason to ticket the Kid. Until a couple of hours later, that is.

According to the Kid, they roused him as he slept in the car on a suburban residential street, hauled him to jail for public intoxication—and impounded the rental car. Every time the Kid took the wheel, it seemed, his vehicle headed for the pound: the Japanese car was the third of his mounts to reach the pound in a mere month's time.

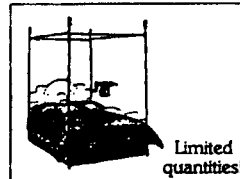
As the Kid himself might conclude, when bad things happen, they have a tendency to happen again. ☐

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hit him from the rear had a maximum liability coverage of \$20,000. From that amount, the lawyer planned to collect not only for the pickup's damage but for the arm injury as well.

"What's wrong with your arm?" the Old Man asked.

"Can't you see? It hurts, man."

"It hurts? Like shit! There sure wasn't nothing wrong with that arm until you went to see that lawyer."

A look of beleaguered meekness passed over the Kid's face.

"Don't give me that hurt shit; you're down here on the streets!" the Old Man bellowed with anger. "That shit is all right for the lawyers, but you're here with us."

"But my arm *does* hurt. Can't you see?" the Kid said.

The Old Man reached out and pulled on the arm; the Kid winced and drew back. Then the Old Man went off into a silent speculation which I'm sure had to do with the Kid's possible place in the Old Man's financial schemes.

Over the days that I'd known him, he'd explained his income to me. His system for survival wasn't completely honest, but it was shrewd. At least these are the facts—if I was able to separate lies from the true accounts he gave.

The Old Man claimed to own a mobile home in California, which he rented through an agent. His gains, he said, were held for him by a friend in California, never spent. I never saw a copy, but he said that he received a check from the Social Security Administration, for disability. He showed me an envelope bearing his name and the address of a Dallas center for the homeless. Its return address bore the logo of a shelter in Los Angeles. From

this envelope he withdrew a second envelope, mailed to him at the L.A. address. It came from a California welfare agency. The letter said that California was paying the Old Man about \$350 a month, also for disability relief.

"I get my check through California, because they pay more than Texas does—about \$200 more a month," he explained. "On the second or third day of the month, they send my check to the mission in L.A., and the comptroller at the mission, he forwards it to me. I get it on the fifth or sixth, and then I send \$20 to him. We've been doing it that way for 13 years," the Old Man told me.

His total monthly income, he claimed, was some \$1200, too much for food-stamp eligibility but enough to allow him to plan—or dream—about renting a place of his own.

"I want a place where I can have a garden," he'd say, and then launch into a description of the plants he'd grow and the dishes he'd prepare. Sometimes such day-dreaming would carry him afar, and he'd recite recipes. The best way to make biscuits, he once told me, is to combine ordinary flour with pancake mix.

The sixth of the month was less than a week away. The Old Man vowed that when he cashed the upcoming set of checks, instead of going on a binge, he would rent a place of his own. He carried a section of classified ads in his back pocket, glancing at it from time to time, circling selections on its pages.

It had occurred to me, as I'm sure it had to the Old Man, that the Kid was eligible for food stamps, and that he might soon have resources of his own. The Kid was fast becoming a good investment, accord-

The Kid was chauffeuring a blonde who'd asked for a ride to a food-stamp office.

ing to the prospectus of the streets.

"Shit, Kid. If you get that money, you'll get you a new car, and the first thing you know, you'll be out driving drunk and you'll wind up in jail, and it'll cost you all of your money to get out again," the Old Man said.

"No, man, I'm going to get me a car and go to Florida. There's all kinds of work there because of the hurricane. I'm going to get me a roofing job," he whined. "I know who will give it to me."

"You're going to get in that car, and dammit, I bet you that you don't get no further than Shreveport before the cops get you for weaving in the road," the Old Man barked.

"Man, you just don't believe me," the Kid said, as if his pride was feeling some pain. "You think I just be on these streets because I'm a wino or something, just because I happen to be here now, just because I had some bad fucking luck. But you'll see, man, I'm going to get a job and put my life in shape."

"If you get a job," the Old Man cautioned, "you won't keep it for a month."

"A month! Who do you think I am?" the

Kid protested.

"Yeah, well, two months, maximum. How long did you keep your last job?" the Old Man said in an accusing way.

The Kid became defensive. "Yeah, but that was because..."

"See! It's just like I told you!" the Old Man snorted. "Two months, maximum, that's the most that you can hold a job—because you're an alky, that's why. The longest an alky can keep a job is two months, Maximum time."

It seemed as if the Old Man was cranking up The Lecture, a staple of wino discourse in which winos repeat the sermons that they hear almost daily from professional do-gooders—social workers, preachers, and the like—and mere passersby.

"I'm not an alky," the Kid blurted. "Take it easy, Kid," the Old Man said, extending his hand and chuckling. "Here, shake hands with an alky."

The Kid grinned and then shook the Old Man's hand. He'd received The Lecture all right, but in the Old Man's mouth, it had a forgiving finale.

"I tell you what, Kid. When I get my checks next week, I'm going to get me a place and let you move in."

The Kid nodded with incredulity and hope.

"But I'll tell you something else," the Old Man continued. "When I get that place, you're going to have to take the front room, because when you get drunk, and come driving through that front door with that new car of yours, I don't want to be sleeping next to the street!"

It was a Tuesday, and the Old Man and I
Continued on next page

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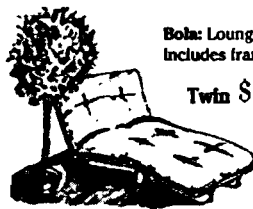
\$239

(mattress sold separately)



Swivel Back Director's Chair: Natural wood w/ Black or Natural fabric.

\$29⁹⁵

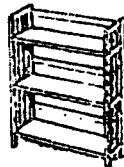


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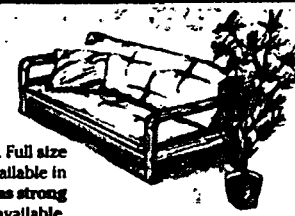
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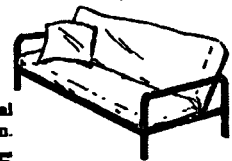
The Slider: Convertible sofa. Full size hardwood frame with futon. Available in maple, honey oak and black. Twice as strong as pine. Three arm styles available.

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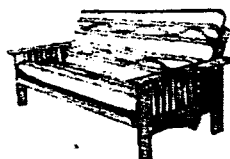
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Mission Slider: S.A. Teak frame for those with discriminating taste. Full size with futon.

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swerved into another lane, striking another car before making his getaway. But there wasn't any mention in the papers of any impact from behind, and the papers didn't say anything about taking the Kid's pickup to the pound.

The Old Man and I nodded to each other, knowingly. We both were sure that here was a case of a drunk who couldn't keep his facts straight.

"But I tell you, there was two wrecks!" the Kid whined.

In his half-coherent way, he began speculating about why the police report was incomplete. The Old Man and I pointed out that if it came down to a wino's word against the word of cop, it's pretty plain who would win. As far as we were concerned, anything not recorded by the police was simply a lie.

Our doubt was so obvious that the Kid was nearly in tears.

The Old Man leafed through the papers again.

"Here," he said, pointing to a line on one of the forms. "You got a ticket."

The entry showed a violation of something called FMFR.

"Well, the cop gave me a ticket for not having insurance," the Kid told us for the first time.

At that, the Old Man began a judgelike summation, intended to dismiss the Kid from concern. "Well, you shouldn't have been driving without insurance, that's against the law, and if you break the law, boy, you're wrong. You can't collect nothing from nobody."

"But I keep telling you, I had just bought the truck the day before!" the Kid protested.

"Yeah, but you shouldn't have taken it off the lot without insurance—you're supposed to know that," the Old Man said. His tone of voice said that the Kid was really only a child, oblivious to any responsibility.

But by now, a third figure was listening to the talk. The new listener was Ed, a bright-eyed young black who wore granny glasses. He had a bedroll slung to one of his sides, an overnight bag on the other. From what I'd been able to assess, Ed wasn't a wino so much as a casualty of the economy; unlike the winos, he tried to find work at the labor pools every day, and sometimes did.

Ed began asking questions like a guy in the know. By the time he'd finished interrogating the Kid, Ed was convinced that the Kid's story was true. Or else—one can never be sure—he had the rest of us con-

vinced that he believed.

"I'd say it's about time for you to start working on some *pain*," Ed advised.

The Kid looked at him, puzzled.

"Yeah, some *pain*, man! You've got to have some *pain*!" Ed exclaimed.

Then Ed told the Kid about whiplash and the lucrative suits that result. As the sun was going down and the Old Man and I were preparing to vanish for the night, Ed and the Kid, seeing opportunity on the horizon, went traipsing off towards Parkland Hospital. Theirs was a distant vision, perhaps, but an important one. The Kid had a chance to become a Check Man, years before his time.

In the morning, the Kid ambled onto the library's plaza, his eyes nervous and darting, as if he were working on a plan.

He'd spent the night in a Parkland waiting room, his neck in a brace, he said. Doctors had X-rayed and examined him. According to the Kid, they had told him that he had a chipped vertebra in his neck, that he might have a pinched nerve, and that his left arm was colder than his right. The Kid's pockets were stuffed with papers from the visit. One of them showed that he'd been scheduled for a pain clinic. Another was a prescription for an aspirin substitute.

"I've got a case, man!" the Kid declared. He held his arms in front of him, palms out, as though displaying stigmata.

"Look at this," he said, nodding. "The left hand is sweating, but the right one is OK." I looked, and it was strangely true.

The night before, the Kid had also met a passing mentor, or perhaps merely a steerer, who'd told him about a lawyer who takes injury cases on contingency pay.

"He told me that the attorney will give me \$100 as soon as he takes my case," the Kid said. "He even said that the attorney would give him \$50 for bringing me in."

He was to meet the steerer at the corner of Ervay and Young, at one o'clock that afternoon. The steerer was going to take him to the lawyer's office, he said.

Of course, to have a case, the Kid would need a police report describing the second of the wrecks that he claimed he'd had. I handed over another four dollars. His eyes were glowing with the brightness of booze when he returned, wagging a brown paper bag in one hand, a sheaf of papers in the other. Inside the brown bag was a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor, which, he later told me, he'd bought with money that he'd



If you're sober, you don't start trouble among street people by hurling

insults or accusations: Quentin, 36, has been a drifter for nine years

panhandled.

"It was God! It was God! Don't tell me this happened by accident!" he hollered as he came up to me. What God had done, he said, was to send him "Plan B"—or a second line to a lawyer—"Plan A" being the scheme that the steerer had proposed.

Divine intervention had come about through revelation of the number 68.

"You see, when I went to get the police report, I had to take a number, just like yesterday. Well, yesterday, the number I got was 68. So when they called 68 today, I went to the desk, but another guy was there, saying that his number was 68. The other guy, man, he's some kind of private investigator, and he said that if I'd call him this afternoon at five o'clock, he'd recommend an attorney for me.

"So you see, this wasn't no coincidence. This was God's way," he exclaimed, rising to his feet, spreading them wide.

He pointed into the air, as if cheering a football team.

"Sixty-eight! The number 68, that's how God was telling me!" he said. "Man, I know

I've got a case now!" he shouted.

I looked over the police report he'd retrieved. Just as he'd told us, there had been a second wreck. The Kid had been hit from behind, and other cars had stacked up behind the one that hit him. The offending driver was insured through a risk pool—an indication that he might not have been the best of drivers—and had been ticketed for speeding. The Kid's pickup had been taken to the pound because the wreck had left it inoperable. Nothing in the papers mentioned drunk driving on anybody's part. The papers confirmed the tale that the Kid had told.

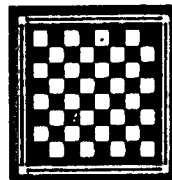
The Kid asked me to join him in the alcove on the Ervay side of the library, which is shielded from public view. That niche is a favorite for drinking, and it's also the place, I had gathered, where the Kid usually sleeps. While he nipped at his bottle, I stared around in absolute boredom.

A little before 1 p.m., I looked at my watch. I reminded the Kid that his appointment was looming. But he didn't budge.

Continued on next page

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asked if I might be doing a job, and when I told people that I was a journalist in real life, they thought I was just telling a wine tale. I had become one of the crowd, because I looked the part.

Ten years ago, when the central library, at Young and Ervay Streets, opened its doors, its architects weren't aware that its hospitality and open spaces would make it a center of wine life. But the library admits all comers, has public rest rooms, is warm in winter and cool in summer, and for times when the weather is pretty, it has concrete benches outside. In October, the library's winos were taking in the morning sun at the benches on its easternmost side, then moving to the westernmost side in the afternoon.

A dozen of us were soaking up the warmth on that Wednesday when the Kid began trying to tell his story. Behind us, sitting cross-legged beneath a planter-box tree, was a lithe 45-year-old whom I knew only as Larry. His companion, a pot-bellied, toothless, bronze-skinned woman, was massaging his neck. Behind them, on a bench that faced into the library's brown-tinted glass front, were the two snobs, whom everyone took to be winos, though they must have done all their drinking in dives; I never saw either with a bottle. They dressed like the rockabilly beaus that they'd probably been in the bygone past, and they kept to themselves, as if their faded glamour still set them apart today.

That morning one of the snobs had gone to the Farmer's Market and begged or rummaged a bag of tomatoes, which he and his buddy weren't offering to share. The two never spoke to the Kid, probably because of his age, nor to me, probably because of my beard and my crutch—neither of them a sign of wine ambition or self-sufficiency.

Across the plaza from the Kid and me, a meticulously primed and coiffured black woman sat atop her nylon car coat, which was lined in fake fur. She was having a conversation with herself, as schizophrenics do. Pacing back and forth between this lady and us, stoking himself with cigarettes and blowing smoke, was a young man whom the winos called The Jamaican, and whom they also took to be a crazy of some kind.

I say these people were present that day; no one's memory can track the comings and goings of all the characters who make the library their daylight home. The building's front side has a surface of brown mirrored glass, and two or three days a week, a Mexican-American in his 30s showed up to gesticulate at the figure he saw in the glass. Sometimes he had to wait his turn: the car-coat woman also talked to the window.

About half the winos who live on downtown streets are somehow deranged—like the glass-talkers—and hanging out at the library, you soon learn to pay them no mind. If they're speaking, they're not speaking to you, and there's no sense intervening in their disputes with themselves. When they pass, you look up only if they're yelling, and you look up mainly to see if you should get out of the way.

"Bad things happen; I mean it," the Kid continued.

I nodded but didn't say a word.

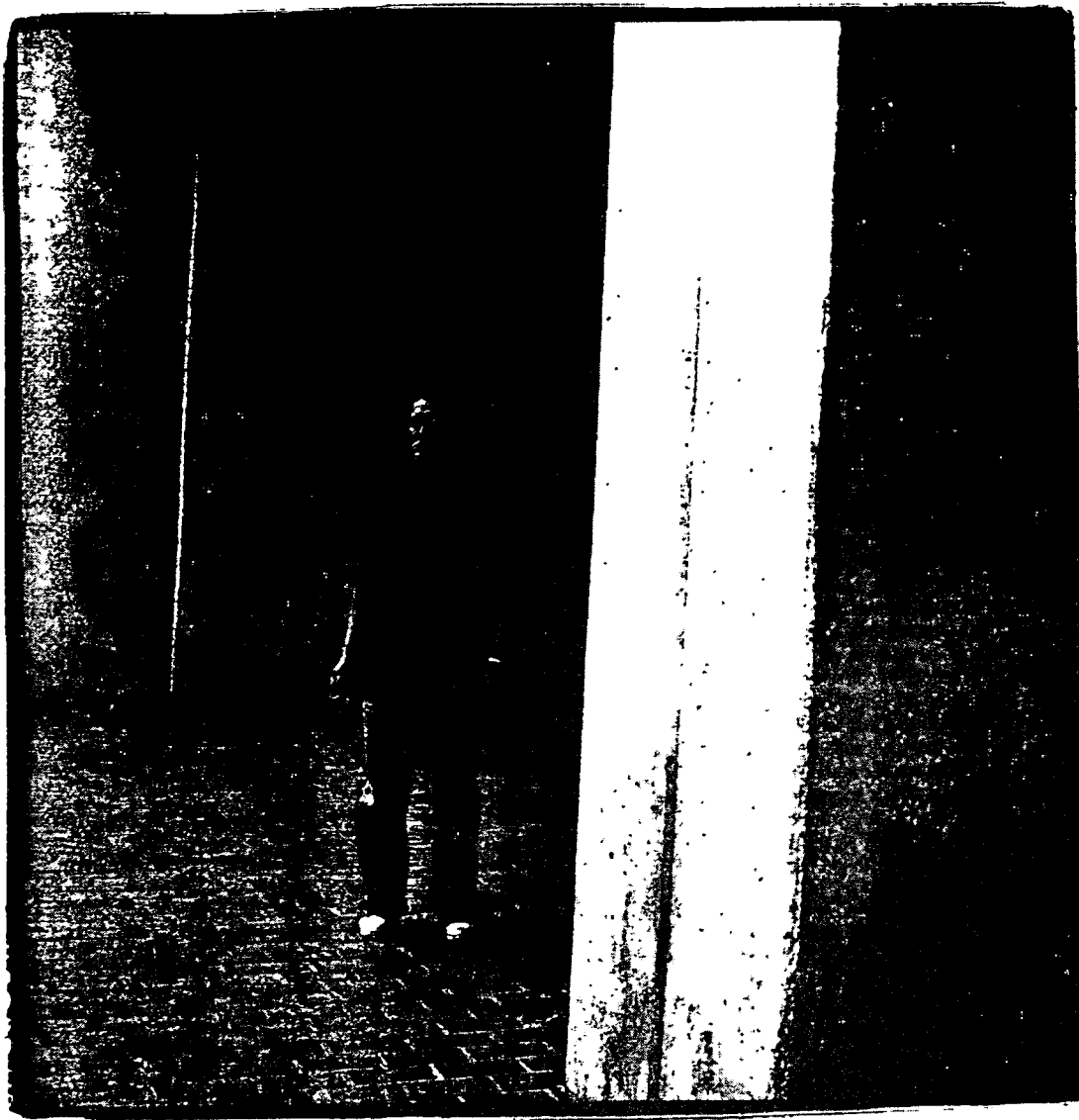
He began the convoluted story of his descent to the streets, a fate which—the way he told it that day—was the outcome of a car wreck less than two weeks before.

I listened, and Larry and his woman listened, as the Old Man already had listened—half-attentively, perhaps, but with one ear cocked for lies. On the streets—among winos, anyway—you have to do that, because everybody is always lying. If tales are interesting, and especially if they're funny, you don't ask for them to be true.

Instead, you consider yourself lucky. Good tales help to pass the time, and a man's ability to tell them testifies to a certain competence. If a guy tells good tales, you conclude that his company might be a pleasure. On the other hand, if his stories are stumbling, petty, and boastful, whether or not they ring true, you can be pretty sure that the teller is retarded or mildly insane. You want to stay away from guys like that, because they can't take care of themselves, and taking care of yourself is the first rule of the streets.

The Kid said that he'd been driving his 10-year-old Japanese pickup on one of the city's avenues when another motorist had clipped his left front fender, then sped away.

"Man, he bent my fender all in. You could still drive it, yeah, but the bumper, man, it was stretched way out like *this*," the Kid said. He stood, put an elbow to his chest, and rotated his forearm outward at a 90-degree angle, so that I'd understand just how much



Winos move stiffly, slowly, and aimlessly: 'Road Dog' (opposite, above)

says he has spent 18 years on the street; James, age 26 (opposite, below),

has been homeless for two years; Joanne (above), 39, is an American Indian.

the bumper had been bent.

He remained standing to continue his tale.

"So I stopped, see, and the next thing I know, here was another car coming at me, from behind, and pow!—it hit me so hard that it knocked that rear windshield right out of the truck!"

The Kid sat down after he said that.

"Oh, yeah, and I almost forgot," he added. "Then, after that car hit me, a whole bunch of cars piled up behind it. Man, there was cars lying everywhere!"

"And then, man"—he was rubbing his hands over his face, as if even thinking about it made him weary—"and then, they took my pickup to the pound, and it's still there, man. And the very next day, I get put in detox, and somebody stole my bag! What do you make of that, huh? The homeless—stealing from one another, man!"

That was just the beginning of his tale. After that, he started into a story about how a wine woman had almost gotten him stabbed by a dude in a bar. But before he could finish it, the news came by.

"The Mobil building is on fire!" somebody yelled.

Excited voices called to one another across the library's little plaza.

"Yeah, the top floor of the Mobil building, that's what they say."

"How many stories does that building have?"

"Hah! It's tall enough that they won't be able to get nobody out, that's what. Those people will burn like *bacon* up there."

"Won't be able to get no water up there, either!"

"No wonder I seen all them fire trucks. What time is it, anyway?"

It was about 10:30 on the morning of October 28, a time when the Dallas Fire Department did investigate a report of smoke at the Mobil building but found no fire.

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Dick J. Reavis

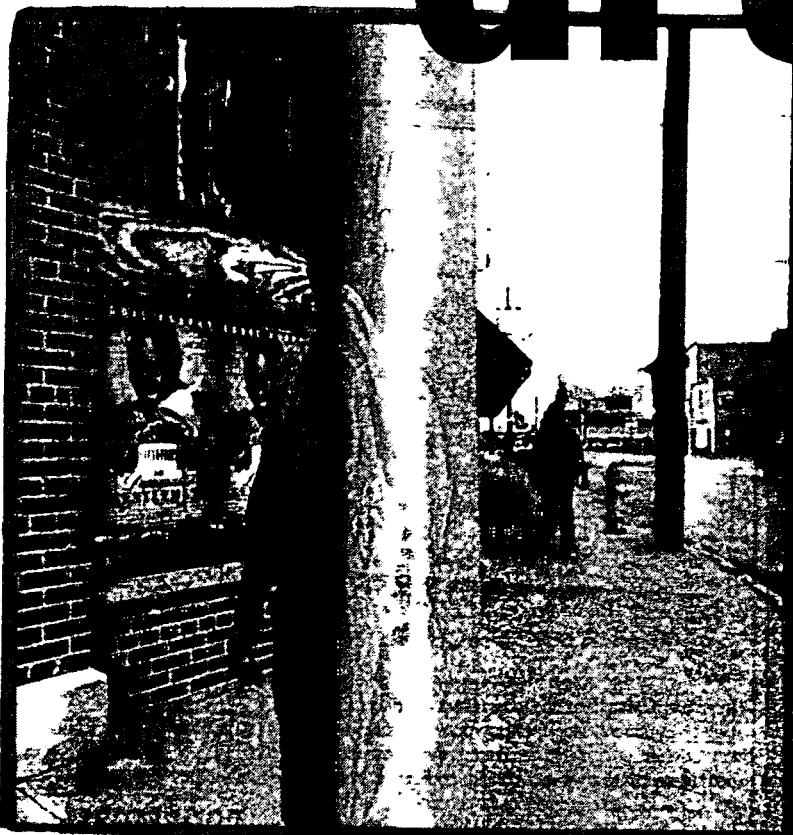
Bottled



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Among
winos, if
tales are
interesting,
you don't
ask for
them
to be true.

dreams



"I don't care what the people say," the Kid was telling me. "When bad things happen, bad things *happen*."

The Kid is one of the city's 5,000-15,000 homeless people, but what made him especially young, at age 29, was the minority group in which he'd cast his lot: he was among winos, who account for less than 10 percent of the total number of America's homeless. Winos may have invented homelessness, but during the Reagan-Bush years, hordes of others were forced to adopt their lifestyle, in numbers that winos alone could have never achieved.

Winos are mostly men who have passed into middle age, and in their ranks, the Kid stood out like a pup among curs. He had a narrow face, a broad smile, and jet-black hair trimmed short like that of an office clerk. Instead of donning regional garb, like older winos—jeans, gimme caps, and castoff dress shirts—the Kid wore Bermuda shorts, a polo shirt, and a red baseball cap turned around backwards, rapper-style. Winos move stiffly, slowly, and aimlessly, but the Kid was as quick, nervous, and spritgy as a daddy longlegs. His stomach was flat and his skin was neither weathered nor tattooed. He looked out of place among those of us who were hanging around the library that day.

I fit in the group by accident, I suppose you'd say. A few weeks earlier I'd fallen from a ladder and had ended up with a severed nerve in one hand—covered by a cast—as well as a busted heel, which the doctors had wrapped in a boot of Velcro and steel. I had to use a crutch to get around, and because of the hand's condition, I couldn't shave. In less than a month I'd gone from looking like a middle-aged writer to a dead ringer for a man of the streets.

It was mid-October, and I was spending my days at the main library, eyes peeled for a story to write while my mobility returned. My colleagues and editors had gone through ethical spasms about the need for me to tell the winos that I was reporting on them, but all of that was beside the point. Nobody had

By

Bottled dreams

Continued from last page

Nonetheless, for more than half an hour everybody masticated the story of the Mobil fire. They embellished it with recollections of grand blazes in Houston, New Orleans, and Florida.

When the recollections touched on Florida, the Kid joined in. He said that he had worked as a security guard there. "I'd been a regular at Daytona Beach, he'd worked for a roofing company, he had picked vegetables there. He spoke with such enthusiasm that he completely diverted the conversation. The Mobil fire was forgotten, while everybody compared notes about Florida—about how much farm contractors paid per basket or bushel or bag, about who paid by the week, who paid by the day, and where you can sleep and shower for free.

The Kid stood up again, to demonstrate how he'd slid off a roof in Florida. He had been saved, he said, because, at the start of his fall, his thumb had been snagged by a nail that protruded from a gutter. He'd dangled by his thumb for several long seconds, until his boss man had reeled him back onto the roof, he claimed.

Everybody grinned, because their lie detectors were going off. But nobody challenged the tale, because it was an interesting tale, and moreover, because if you're sober, you don't start trouble among street people by hurling insults or accusations—at least not until you're sure who you're dealing with. My instinct, as the Kid's ostensible companion, was to get him out of there.

"What say we send the Kid to check out that fire?" I asked Larry, as if the Kid were our son.

"Yeah, go tell us if you can see the smoke," Larry told the Kid.

So the Kid took off. Forty-five minutes later, he was back, a half-dozen red ribbons in his hands. They were prize ribbons, the kind you get in grade-school art contests. A legend was stamped on them in silver: "DEA Leading the Way. Drug Free! Remembering Enrique Camarena."

"Yeah, see, the DEA, they was having a party or something. They had all these tents out and things like that, see," the Kid explained.

"They gave me these," he said, gesturing to the ribbons that the rest of us were now holding in a puzzled way, "and they had free pop, man!"

"Free pop," Larry repeated with a grumble, as if he'd decided that the Kid was definitely a child, entertained by any old thing.

"What about the fire?" I asked.

The Kid's face went blank for a second. Then he smiled so broadly you could have counted his teeth. He was embarrassed. "Oh, I guess I never made it," he muttered with a shrug.

That same afternoon I was talking with the Old Man as we sat on the library's courtyard wall, abutting Young Street. The Old Man is a balding guy in his 60s, short and stubby as can be. He's a waddling archetype of the oldest wino crowd, and a hero of sorts, because he's not entirely without means: he's a Check Man.

Guys like him have graduated *causis honoris* from sleeping in alleyways. No longer mere paupers, they receive sustenance through the mails. Veterans Administration checks. Social Security checks. Food stamps. Disability and suit-



No one's memory can track the comings and goings of all the characters who make the library their daylight home: Lyle, 35, and Vicky, 37

settlement checks. These are the basis of their bottle-to-mouth way of life.

Check Men are an elite among winos. Some of them rent apartments from time to time, and almost all of them take motel rooms on Harry Hines or Fort Worth Avenue during the first week of the month, when their checks arrive.

Most are over 40, and that puts them into a second category of the privileged. Young men must pay to sleep in bunkhouses and shelters for the homeless; most sleep in parking garages and beneath bridges instead. They shower at a city-run facility, the Day Resource Center; if they can show identification, the city loans them a towel for free.

But men over 40 face none of these hassles. They can stay at the Austin Street Shelter, which the winos call "The Walk-In," for free. Because of their income or their age or both, Check Men can shower and shave any night that they desire.

Check Men are usually on the streets because their landlords, families, or women won't have them anymore. If they get thrown out of the shelters, ordinarily for some drunken outrage, they may sleep on the streets for a few days, but they're more likely to take to the road, for a new town, with new shelters. But even when they're traveling, they're never out of

touch with the people at the address where their checks arrive. They have a locus to their lives.

The Old Man and I were mulling over the Kid's accounts of the wreck—really, talking just to enjoy the weather and pass the time—when the Kid came up from nowhere. He asked if we'd seen a character whose name meant nothing to me. The Old Man said that the guy was in the grove on the corner of City Hall Plaza, and the Kid darted off. He was back in a blink, as if he were a boomerang. The Old Man and I had to pay attention to him now, because he was standing beside us like a puppy wanting to play.

"You know," I told him, "we've been talking about your wreck. If you were really hit from behind, somebody should have to pay for your truck."

The slits in the Kid's eyes narrowed. He wasn't sure he could trust what I was saying.

Like seasoned jailbirds, old guys who've been on the streets for a few years become authorities on dozens of angles of dozens of laws, civil and criminal alike. Like the well-to-do of any social strata, Check Men are also presumed to have special insight. They puff up their chests as they declaim and advise. The Old Man went into a discourse about how it was true—if you get

hit from the rear, it's the other guy's fault, not yours.

"Yeah, well, they be telling me all these things, but how do I know? I mean, sure I know, but you see, it's just people here on the streets telling me that," the Kid muttered—as if me and the Old Man, who had presumably been mere winos an hour before, had suddenly been transformed into white-wigged solons from Her Majesty's court.

We kept assuring him that if he found a lawyer, he might have a case. And we told him that he'd need to start by getting a copy of the police report of his accident.

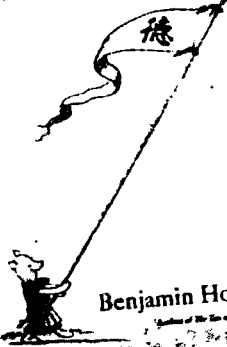
It was as if we'd suggested the impossible. He didn't know how to get a police report, or where, and he didn't have any money to pay copying fees. His grimaces showed how easy it is to get discouraged and just give up.

As much to get rid of him as to relieve the pained look on his face, I peeled off the four dollars that he'd need to pay for the police report and sent him on his way to the city's traffic records department. If he was really a wino, I figured, he wouldn't be back at all: a couple of liquor stores were in his path.

Half an hour later, literally whooping as he crossed the plaza, the Kid came bouncing back. Me and the Old Man pored over the papers that he brought, without spotting any prospect for a windfall. They testified that a driver had clipped the Kid's pickup, just as he'd said, and had then

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Bottled dreams

Continued from last page
not even to see if the steerer was waiting at the corner.

"Fuck him, man!" he spat. "I've got Plan B. Sixty-eight, man! The Lord up there"—he pointed to the sky—"he's looking after me."

I couldn't keep from scowling.

"Huh, I bet I know what you're thinking," the Kid said. "You think I'm counting my chickens too early, don't you?"

"You mean, counting your chickens before they're hatched," I said.

The library's plaza is a Union Square of the storyteller's art. Older, seasoned winos have preserved the art of inspired recall, even if their competence, as a group of nostalgics, is limited.

Perpetual abuse of alcohol doesn't sharpen one's wits, after all, and derelict lives don't yield an extensive variety of story material. But most winos try to tell a tale or two, and all things considered, their tales are at least as interesting as the retellings of television shows that are the content of much American conversation today.

The Old Man was the library's champion storyteller. It wasn't because of the quality of his voice—an entirely common one, with a plain cracker accent—but because he put imaginative twists on his commonplace past, probably with little basis in fact. His usual recollections were of his 28 car wrecks and eight wives, with the Story of the Surgery Scars, also told as the Story of the 700-Pound Refrigerator, as a genre of a third kind.

The Old Man's wreck stories included only accounts of cars that he'd demol-

The Old Man and I nodded to each other knowingly. We both were sure that here was a case of a drunk who couldn't keep his facts straight.

ished—no fender-bender prattle here—and the dozen that I heard were notable because, according to the retellings, nobody was ever injured but him. But it was the Story of the Scars that showed his strongest suit, his ability to weave a single, simple incident into a half dozen different stories.

He'd point to the scars on his wrist, and when he was sober, begin by saying, "I got that when I was unloading a refrigerator from a truck. The loading dock caved in beneath me, because it was of old or rotten wood. There I was, on the ground under the dock, with 700 pounds of refrigerator on top of that arm!"

Then the serious elaboration began.

"When they got that refrigerator up off of me, the bone had come plumb out of the arm, I mean, it was sticking through the

flesh! I sat there and reset it myself, with my other hand. It didn't hurt much, or I didn't feel much pain, because I was drunk, you know. Hell, it was three days later before I got around to going to the emergency room. When I got there, I had my hand in my pants pocket. That hand was so swollen that they had to cut my pants open to get it out of there."

One Saturday afternoon, two days after the Kid blew off his appointment with the steerer, the Old Man and I were sitting with nearly a dozen other guys on the library's Wood Street side, and he was telling a different version of the Refrigerator Tale. Hidden in the blue-nylon bag he carried was an open bottle of malt liquor. A guy to his left had bought flasks of whiskey for himself and two other winos and was lecturing both about the duties of the indentured friendship he'd thusly begun.

To the left of these three, a half dozen guys in jeans and gimme caps were passing around bottles of malt liquor and wine. One of them was singing a country tune. "Lord, It's Hard to Be Humble (But I'm Doing the Best That I Can)," and the others, some white, some black, were bantering, jiving, and generally making noise. In that essentially competitive context, the Old Man's scar story was worth telling only with a new twist.

According to different pasts he invented for himself, in the distant era before he'd landed on the streets the Old Man had been a longtime farmer, truck driver, electrician, fry cook, and chef. But on this afternoon, perhaps because he was drinking, he chose a soldierly past.

"You see those scars? Man, I picked those up in Vietnam," he began. "Yeah, I was in Vietnam! Of course I was in Vietnam! In Korea, too! You see, I was in the service for 26 years, as sure as you're born!"

"We were out in the jungle, you know, on one of those search-and-destroy things. And I run into this mine contraption that the Viet Cong had put out there. It nearly blew my arm off. The bone come right out of the side of that arm, and the impact of that mine was so great, well, it knocked my rifle away."

"Just about then this Cong raises up. He was about three or four feet in front of me. So with that bone that's sticking out of my arm, you know, I stab that Cong"—he stood, bent his hand backwards and made a jabbing motion with his wrist—"just stab and stab and stab till he was dead! Yessiree!"

The three or four guys who were lending an ear laughed with approval at the end of the tale, not because they believed a word of it, but because its lie was worth telling. Even the Kid, who'd sauntered up as the tale was being told, chuckled once or twice.

The Old Man stared severely at the Kid, who didn't look the same. He was clean-shaven and wearing clean clothes—long pants and a flannel shirt, a gift of one of the shelters. The backward-turned cap was gone from his head. He was holding his left arm close to his side.

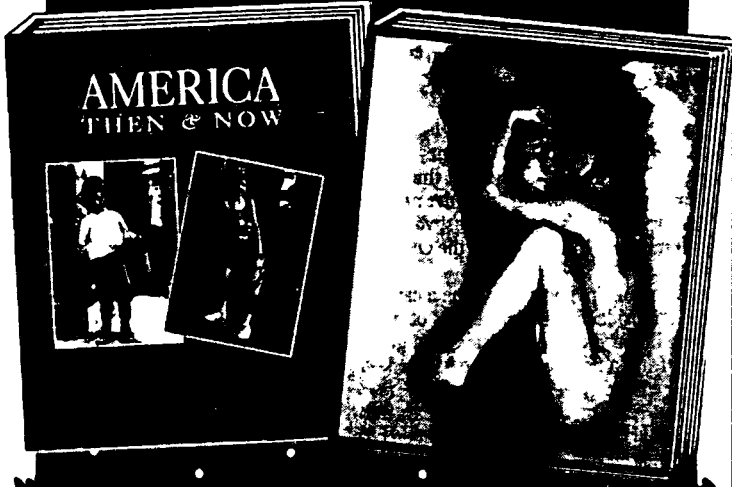
"What's done happened to you, Kid? You look almost human today," the Old Man said with a suspicious glint in his eye.

"Man, I had to get cleaned up to go see that attorney yesterday."

The attorney, he told me, wasn't he of Plan B, but one that he'd picked from Yellow Page listings.

The Kid explained that the driver who'd

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Bottle dreams

Continued from last page

hadn't seen the Kid for two days—ever since he had gone to Irving, where he had friends. He needed to crash with them, the Kid had explained before going, so that he could answer a telephone when the insurance adjuster called.

The season's first good norther was on its way, and around the library plaza, people were chatting with urgency about where, and how, one could sleep warmly at night.

When the Kid turned up, a little past noon, he shrugged off the specter of cold. He had a plan, a purpose in mind. He wanted the Old Man and me to accompany him to the city car pound, where his pickup still sat, accumulating storage fees.

The Kid said that he'd left several things in the pickup, including a change of clothes and, more important, a half dozen unscratched lottery tickets, a chance to make it rich. He'd bought the tickets, he claimed, at a gas station just minutes before the crash, which, the police reports showed, had happened on a Friday—pay-day night. He'd stuck them in his sun visor and had forgotten about them until now.

The pound sits on a rise above Fort Worth Avenue in north Oak Cliff. After the Kid dangled the promise of the lottery before us, I paid for his bus fare and waited at a nearby convenience store as he and the Old Man, who weren't limited by crutches, went uphill to look over the wreck. They came back saying that the pickup was wrecked beyond repair, and that they'd found several lottery tickets, all scratched but one. The Kid handed the untouched ticket to me and held his breath as I revealed the numbers it bore.

The ticket was the last drop of wealth from the Kid's last job, and it could lift him from his descent to the streets. It promised a chance to achieve the wino dream, to make him rich—to make him a Check Man—without physical labor, and even without any schemes. If the Kid hit it big, he would undoubtedly forget his insurance claim.

But he was out of luck that day. With a chilly north wind blowing all around, it was my duty to inform the Kid that he was destined to spend another night sleeping on the streets.

On Wednesday, after talking to the Kid's attorney and an insurance adjuster, the Old Man verified that an insurer had accepted some sort of liability for the by-now-famous wreck. With a couple more telephone calls to a rental agency, the Old Man arranged for the Kid to be loaned a rental car—delivered to the library at the insurance company's expense.

When the Old Man gave me the news, early Thursday, he was far from pleased. Our intervention into the Kid's life had backfired on him.

"It completely changed the Kid's personality," he grumbled to me. "Now he won't listen to anything."

The Kid's transformation started, he said, the minute he had set eyes on the car. "I told the rental company to bring the smallest car they had," the Old Man explained, "because the Kid didn't have any money for gas. They brought a Chevrolet Cavalier, brand new, and white as snow. But the Kid told them that he wanted a Lexus."

The Old Man and the Kid had piled into the Cavalier for a late-afternoon trip to

show the car to the Kid's friends in Irving. "But the Kid was so drunk, he had to ask me how to get there," the Old Man complained. "He was driving as fast as he could, changing lanes, going down one-way streets the wrong way. I tried to tell him to use his turn indicators, but he said that his arm hurt too much to move."

The Kid returned to Dallas in time to drop the Old Man at the Austin Street Shelter for the night. Then he slept in the car—with two strangers from the streets. He had returned Thursday morning to drive the Old Man to the library.

"Those guys he picked up were with him, in the back seat," the Old Man said. "One of them was smoking something; I think it was dope. I asked him to put it out—and he put out that cigarette on the carpet of the floor! A new car, burns on the

The Old Man was the library's champion storyteller. His usual recollections were of his 28 car wrecks and eight wives.

carpeting!" the Old Man exclaimed. "I can't let him move in with me," the Old Man had concluded with a little regret. "There ain't no telling who he'd bring home."

At the moment, he said, the Kid was chauffeuring a blonde who'd asked for a ride to a food-stamp office. He was playing chauffeur to everybody on the streets, the Old Man complained.

Just then, the Kid pulled up in his Cavalier. Having no money to pay a parking meter, he left the engine running at the curb. His left arm hung limply at his side as he scurried towards us, raising his right arm in a greeting of triumph.

But the Old Man barked before the Kid could speak. He'd seen that the Kid still had the blonde in tow, and he was irate. He wanted nothing to do with the flotsam that the Kid was collecting from the streets, he muttered to me.

The Kid slunk quickly back to his car, like a dog with its tail between its legs.

The cold winds of winter blew harder that night, wiping the winos away. The next day neither the Old Man nor the Kid was to be seen, inside the library or out. At noon the sun dipped through the clouds for a wink, and a sole, lonely street character appeared in the courtyard.

She was one of the few women among the regulars, a short-haired, thirtysomething Midwesterner whom we'd often seen wailing over disputes with the man whose company she keeps. The Old Man had told me that she knew everything about everybody, and I had no choice but to give her a try.

"Have you seen the Old Man?" I asked. "He was around earlier this morning, but he's gone now. He may not be back for

Continued on next page.