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Songs from the Black Chair

Amid the almost uninterrupted prosperous sheen of Midtown Manhattan there are small blemishes—especially the closer you get to the corner of East 30th Street and First Avenue, site of the Bellevue shelter and home of my black chair. Outside the gleaming multiplex theater on East 31st and Second Avenue, for instance, you might see a man speaking to himself. Or you might see another man looking extraordinarily disheveled, who just happens to be doing vigorous and manic pull-ups from the walk signal attached to a telephone pole. And the closer you get to the corner of 30th Street and First Avenue, the greater the incidence of untoward and inappropriate behaviors you encounter. You might see, for instance—as I did on my way to work at the Bellevue shelter one night—a man drinking a beer and pissing at the same time. Or you might have to step over puke on the sidewalk, not once but twice or even three times within the space of one block. Or you might see a relatively sedate and normal-looking person, quietly standing in front of a deli, scream out abruptly and with no apparent provocation, “I wish someone would just shoot me—now!”

The prosperous residents of Murray Hill—those occupants of the handsome brownstones and brand-new high-rises—earnestly join forces and make valiant efforts to rid themselves of the repeated aesthetic insults that the endless stream of homeless men headed for the Bellevue shelter inflict on their neighborhood. The good citizens create “neighborhood coalitions” and “shelter task forces,” and they put signs out on their sidewalks imploring passersby not to “water their plants”—that is, not piss on them. For years such organized opposition to the shelter has been going on, but to no apparent avail. Elaborate plans have been drawn up, and approved by the city government, to

ship the whole operation out to Flatbush, Brooklyn, or some other suitably poor and downtrodden part of the city. Maybe the removal of the Bellevue shelter will happen someday, but for now it seems here to stay. The residents of Murray Hill seem unable to rid themselves of the shelter and its wretchedness. The vapors of homelessness seem to be permanently embedded in the landscape. But even if the massive, dark, gothic, ten-story, block-wide shelter were razed at some point in the future, and the site developed into one of those shiny apartment complexes, I think there would still be something not quite right about this place. Desperation will always be drawn to the corner of East 30th and First Avenue, and no amount of money or resolve will extinguish it.

The simple reason the shelter is so hard to extinguish is that it remains a vital and popular destination, at least for a certain type of tourist in New York: the homeless tourist. Twenty thousand men a year come to the shelter, for a night or for a lifetime. And about a thousand of those—those with psychiatric and pressing medical illnesses, the neediest of the needy, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable—are sent to see me and my team of social workers in our cramped back office for “assessment.” What that really means is that we talk to them about what they’re up to, and see what, if anything, we can do for them. (The men usually leave unhappy, because they don’t generally get to stay at the Bellevue shelter but are shipped out to satellite shelters in the outer boroughs.)

A thousand men a year come and sit in the black chair next to my desk. They are between eighteen and eighty years old, usually black or Hispanic, usually with a psychiatric condition and a substance-abuse history (crack, heroin, and alcohol), often with a forensic history (usually released from prison that day), and quite often with a major disease. At some point, I always end up asking: “Are you hearing voices?” “What do the voices say?” “Have you ever seen things that other people didn’t see?” “Have you ever tried to hurt yourself?” “Are you having thoughts of hurting yourself now?” A few times a month I hear responses like “I thought for about an hour today about jumping in front of the subway,” or “I want to die,” or “I can’t tell you whether I’m going to hurt myself or not,” or I am shown wrists that have recently been cut, or bellies and limbs and necks that have long scars

in them. When I hear or see these things, I calmly tell the person in the black chair that I think he needs to go to the hospital in order to be safe. Almost always he agrees without complaint. I call 911 and write a note addressed to the attending psychiatrist, Bellevue Hospital emergency room, detailing my observations and an assessment of their mental status. Fortunately the hospital is only a block away. Within ten minutes, the police and EMTs arrive. “Good luck,” I always say to the men as they are taken away. To my amazement, they almost always say, “Thank you.”

For the records the staff and I are instructed to place the men we see into one or more of the following official categories of disability or distress, as promulgated by the city’s health department:

- SPMI (seriously and persistently mentally ill)
- MICA (mentally ill chemical abuser)
- Axis II (personality disordered)
- Medical
- Forensic (released from jail or prison)
- Over 60 Years Old
- Mentally Retarded/Developmentally Disabled
- Immigrant
- Physically Disabled
- Vocational Problems
- Domestic Situation

It’s a nice list of bureaucratic categories, and it means nothing, really. I’ve created my own list. These, I’ve learned in my two years of sitting next to the black chair, are far more descriptive and pertinent descriptions:

- The Travelers and the Wanderers
- Guided by Voices
- Vietnam Vets
- Waylaid Tourists, Usually Recently Robbed
- Criminals
- “No English” and No Papers

Various Persons Destroyed by Alcohol, Crack, Heroin, or
Other Substance
Alzheimer's Patients and Other Victims of Senility
Manic in America
People Who Choose to Live Underground and in Darkness
The Truly Weird, for Whom We Can Find No Category That Fits

But I keep all this to myself. I sit at the computer and duly check off the city's official list.

Of course, they are all travelers and wanderers. They come from Jamaica, Georgia, Colombia, Kuwait, Poughkeepsie, Italy, Oregon, Taiwan, Wyoming, Poland, Detroit, and Bosnia. And it is Manhattan—not Brooklyn, Queens, or the Bronx—that they want to come to.



Countless times I've been caught in the middle of this exchange:

"Brooklyn! That's all the beds you got tonight? Just Brooklyn! Shit!!" they say.

"Yes, that's the only place there are beds tonight."

"Shit. I ain't going to no fucking Brooklyn! You sure that's it? Nothing in Midtown, or maybe the Wall Street area?"

"No. That's it. All we have is the shelter in Bedford Stuyvesant," I say.

"Fuck, if that's all you got, I'm leaving. I gotta be in Manhattan, man. Maybe I'll come back tomorrow night."

And they get up and leave, back to the streets or park or wherever.

I've learned that homeless people prefer to be in Manhattan, just like everybody else. At first I was indignant—these people are *choosy* about where they're going to stay? But I thought about it and realized that the sources of their livelihood, such as they are, are far more lucrative in Manhattan. Panhandling goes much better in Times Square than in Far Rockaway. The men tell me that if you do it respectfully and look decrepit enough—but not so decrepit as to scare people—you can make between twenty and eighty dollars an hour panhandling in a prime location in Midtown. They may be mentally ill, but they're usually not crazy: it's to Manhattan that the voices tell them to go, and not, for example, to Staten Island.

“So, why did you come to New York . . . that is, Manhattan?” I almost always ask the people in the black chair.

Some of the answers I’ve heard over the years:

“Because Jesus told me to.”

“Because someone was trying to kill me in Las Vegas.”

“Because where I was staying they only let you stay in chairs,
and I want a bed.”

“Because when I got out of prison in Baltimore I read that
Giuliani had brought the crime rate down so I decided to
return to New York.”

“Because this is where the bus brought me.”

“Because I can get better health insurance here than in Puerto
Rico.”

“Because I can’t find my way home. I left my house on Walters
Street in the Bronx ten years ago and I can’t find my way
back.”

“Because I’m John the Baptist—a truth serum given to me at
Trenton State Hospital in 1969 proves it—and can you get
me a bed near the St. John the Divine Cathedral because I
have to go there and tell them I’ve arrived.”

“Who said I was in New York?”

“Because when I was working on the chicken farm in Georgia
last week, a voice told me to come here.”

“Because I always wanted to see the Empire State Building.”

“Because the people here are less crappy than they are in Florida.”

“To compete in a karate championship.”

“Because I want to open a blacksmith shop in Queens.”

“Because my so-called best friend stole everything I had.”

“Because I always wanted to go where no one would find me.”



But even among the travelers there are the prodigious and ceaseless wanderers, those who are committed to motion as a way of life. Traveling around America—which in this case means visiting one shelter and soup kitchen and church basement and subway station and bus depot and abandoned building after another—is their profession. In

the warmer weather, and even in the colder weather, a lot of them camp out, whether it is in Central Park, the woods of upstate New York, or the beaches of California. It doesn't seem to matter really where they are, as long as they can move away from it quickly. A lot of them are actually offered permanent or semipermanent lodging—halfway houses, community residences, and the like—and they invariably turn them down, preferring to move on to the next city. Their destinations are much like those featured in travel advertisements: New Orleans, Las Vegas, L.A., Hawaii, and New York.

There is a specific look to the professional travelers, instantly identifiable—there is almost invariably a certain healthy and woodsy glow about them, no matter how high or drunk or crazy they are. They tend to have long straggly beards and wild eyes and dusty backpacks and sleeping bags. In the summer they wear as little as possible and have dark tans, and their hair gets blond from the sun; in the winter they wear layers of sweaters and have rosy cheeks. They are usually lean. A few of them, self-consciously or not, adopt the romantic trappings of the old hoboes. One night a man plaintively played a harmonica in the waiting room, entertaining his fellow wayfarers. Once I walked past Central Park and saw a group of hoboes sitting around and roasting marshmallows at a campfire, like something out of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. The parallel universe of Central Park West and its fabulously expensive French restaurants, celebrity apartment houses, and endless plush medical—typically psychiatrists'—offices was just thirty feet away.

The shelter staff came to me one night, exasperated, saying there was a white guy somewhere in the building who had been eluding them for hours. The shelter workers had been trying to get his photograph and fingerprints—both required to enter the shelter—but this person, whoever he was, had been stealthily moving from chair to chair and room to room all night long. In other words, he was a traveler even within the confines of the shelter.

“Where is he now?” I asked the security officer.

“In the bathroom—we think,” he said, and led me there.

The bathroom was a predictably dingy, rank affair, distinguished only by the curious fact that the dividers between the stalls were made of marble, with beautiful gray swirling patterns in it. On the marble

was written, in magic marker and in huge letters, “Bums never have a nice day,” and “Suck my homeless dick.” The man sitting on the toilet had tousled reddish blond hair—lots of it—and a thick beard. He was rocking back and forth on the toilet, with his pants on. He looked, I thought, like a psychotic Viking.

“Excuse me,” I said, “would you mind going to have your photograph taken in the screening room? And when you’re done, would you mind coming to my office down the hall?”

“Oh yeah, sure, sure, sure,” he replied.

I left there as quickly as possible, thinking that I had done my job for the night and that I would never see him again. But when I turned around a moment later, back in the office, the Viking was sitting quietly in the black chair next to me.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Leif,” he said. It sounded Nordic or Danish, confirming my Viking theory. He probably would have been a great Viking, I thought; a few thousand years ago his wildness would have served him well. As I was contemplating this, he began doing a kind of dance in the chair—arms and legs and hands and head bouncing away, all of them flowing to different beats—and embarked on a rushed monologue:

“In case you wanted to know, I’m Norwegian, Ukrainian, Swedish, Danish, Irish,” he began. “I’ve lived in Florida, Hawaii, Alaska, Oklahoma, all over Canada, and Cheyenne, Wyoming, but mainly I grew up in South Jersey. The malls suck there, you know? I slept under a car last night. I was in jail for a rape I didn’t commit of my half sister. What else do you need to know?”

“Have you been in the shelter system before?” I asked.

He looked directly at me. “I need help. I need help! No one’s helping me . . . After I got out of detox,” he said, and as he said it I noticed for the first time that his breath stank of liquor, “I didn’t have nowhere to go. That’s why I’m here. But not for long. Thinking of going back to Cheyenne. That was my favorite place. Happy there. That’s where I got convicted of the rape I didn’t commit of my half sister”—I noticed he used the exact same phrasing to describe the alleged crime—“and I want to clear my record. Clear my name!”

“Have you been in the hospital recently?” I said.

“I have very bad nerves,” he said, not exactly to me but, it seemed,

to something beyond me—a general statement to or about the world. “VERY BAD NERVES,” he added for emphasis. “You know who helped me! The nuns helped me. The nuns were fucking AWESOME!” he shouted to the ceiling, and then smiled broadly.

“Do you take any medications?” I said.

“I brought it all on myself,” he said. “Nobody’s fault but mine.” He stood up and produced from his pockets a series of smudged and torn-up hospital papers. The papers said that he had been in a hospital in Maine and before that a detox in Providence and before that a psychiatric hospital in Kansas and before that a rehab in Oregon, and that he had severe diabetes, a seizure disorder, and bipolar disorder. The medical diagnoses surprised me, in a way: he had that healthy look of the travelers, that unworried and rural look that made it seem that at a moment’s notice he could set off on a fifty-mile hike in the woods.

Suddenly he lurched forward in the chair and thirty syringes fell to the floor. They seemed to have fallen out of his red sweatshirt, but from where exactly, I couldn’t tell. He picked up the syringes, one after the other, and stuffed them into his pockets and what seemed like a pouch in his sweatshirt. As he picked up the needles, he kept on talking, not stopping for a second, about nuns, disputed rapes, Cheyenne, and bad malls in New Jersey. At one point he took out a thick wad of bills, again from some mysterious place on his person. “See this!” he said, waving the money right up to my face. “It’s chump change, and it means nothing,” he said, and immediately went back to picking up syringes. Finally he was done, and I got him to sit down again.

“When was the last time you took your meds?” I said.

“The physical shit is nothing. It’s a test, a test! I wish I woulda died after the seizure, I wish I woulda never woken up. Then I wouldn’t have to deal with the HASSLE. The physical shit is nothing. It’s a test by Jesus Christ, a test by God to see how much you can take. The only thing, man, is I gotta keep moving. Death is being static, dude.”

I was about to ask him more about tests by Jesus Christ and hassles and nuns, because I liked him and was interested, when he jumped again—as if electrically shocked by something in the chair—and ran out of the room. By the time I got out into the hallway, he was gone. A few syringes had fallen out of his pocket and were bouncing on the

shiny floor of the shelter. Fortuitously, the security officer hadn't been at his post, and Leif, the psychotic Viking, the adventurer, was able to leave undetected, free to reenter his world.

There's another section of our Department of Mental Health-approved forms regarding the outcome of the services we provide. At the conclusion of each visit, we're supposed to check off "Accepts Assessment" in the case of a successful result, and "Left Shelter" in the case of an unsuccessful one. For Leif, I clicked "Left Shelter" and then sat in the quiet of my office reflecting on the natural storm I had just encountered. For a few minutes I worried about Leif and where he was, but then I stopped. I realized I didn't feel bad at all about his departure. I didn't know what provoked the electrical shock that made him bolt, but I did know that he'd be better off out there, journeying to his mental Wyoming.

He'll be happier out there, I thought. He'll be happier out there, in America. On the computer, I clicked "Accepts Assessment."



Here at the shelter, the Vietnam War continues to be fought on a nightly basis.

Vietnam vets sit in the black chair at alarming rates. Almost every night, it seems, we get someone who was, and perhaps still is, in Vietnam. Or at least some version of Vietnam.

He was well over six feet, probably closer to six and a half. He was muscular and lean, even in his depleted state. It was clear, from the vapor that rose from his breath and the redness of his eyes and an interesting kind of melted quality of his black flesh, that he was a deeply committed alcoholic. As he sat quietly in the black chair, I could sense the ranginess and the sheer physical power of his limbs. His forehead was sweating, and the sweat seemed to smell of pure alcohol. He conveyed an ineffable and monstrous sadness. He appeared, as he sat in front of me, to have been scorched by some unspeakable horror.

"Did you have something to drink tonight?" I said.

"I have something to drink every night," he replied, with an ag-grieved expression of enormous disdain.

I was working that night with a bookish and rather earnest social worker. "Why do you drink?" Mark asked the man.

“WHY?” Another look of infinite disdain, this time directed toward Mark.

“Why do I drink? Why do I drink?” he said, his anger seeming to rise within him. Why wouldn’t I drink?, he seemed to be thinking. “I drink to forget. I drink to forget.” And then he said it for a third time, as if to fully cement it in his mind. “I drink to forget.”

“To forget what?” Mark said.

“Vietnam, man. I drink to forget Vietnam,” he said.

“And what about Vietnam in particular?” Mark said.

“What in particular?” he said. The man in the black chair looked toward me, as if appealing for help. The look on his face, a mixture of anger and consternation, said that of all the stupid questions he had been asked by all the stupid social workers in his entire life, this was by far the stupidest. I was about to intervene, to say he really didn’t need to answer, when he spat out, in a torrent of words: “I was a good soldier. A fucking good soldier. A fucking warrior. Everything they told me to do, I did it. I was real good at following orders. They told me drop something, I dropped it. They told me to pick something up, I picked it up. They told me to kill people, I killed people. I was very, very good at it. I think I killed a lot of people. I don’t know how many—maybe hundreds, maybe more. I don’t know. It was hard to tell in Vietnam what the hell was going on. All I know is I killed and killed and killed. I see pictures of it in my head. Bodies and shit. I drink to forget that, see?”

Done with his speech, the Warrior appeared to be suddenly spent. He seemed to enter some other, less present state of being, his eyes taking on a faraway look.

Indeed, I could imagine the Warrior being an excellent killer. I saw visions of him charging through jungles, firing manically away, a brilliant killing machine. I saw him in swamps and battlefields, with bombs and grenades, with lots and lots of dead people left in his wake.

“Did you ever think of . . . you know . . . like joining a peer group of any kind?” Mark said.

“A what?” said the Warrior. His look of outrage returned.

“You know, like a peer group for Vietnam vets who have gone through the same thing and have addiction issues?”

The Warrior again appealed to me for help. A peer group, whatever

that was, seemed to be much worse than anything he'd encountered in Vietnam.

"Nope, never thought of that," he said. "I really just came here for a bed. It's cold outside, you know?"

I nodded.

"I just want a fucking bed," he said.

I'm supposed to recommend further psychiatric assessment and treatment for those clients who I think would benefit from it. I've learned to recommend that only if the client is interested in or able to change. I wrote on my form "Client is capable of negotiating shelter system," which is what I put when I have no recommendations.

"Do you mind giving me your V.A. card?" I asked the Warrior. He handed it to me, and I quickly wrote down his date of birth and service number for the chart.

"Any more questions for us?" I said, realizing that there had been none so far.

"Nope."

"Okay, you can go back to the waiting room. The bus will be here in a few hours to take you to the shelter in Brooklyn."

"Okay," he said and left. He looked momentarily happy, realizing the questions were over.

Later that night I entered the Warrior's personal data into the computer. His birth date on the V.A. card was 11-3-55.

November 3, 1955.

"Hold on," I said, turning to Mark. "This guy couldn't have been in Vietnam. He would have been what . . . seventeen . . . when the war ended."

"Yeah?" Mark said.

"There's no way he was there. He was underage, under eighteen, in 1972."

"You mean he was making all that stuff up?"

"I guess," I said. "He must have been. Jesus Christ."

I did the math again. Yeah, seventeen. It wouldn't have been possible.

I was angry. I really wanted to see him as a Warrior. I sort of liked those images of him running through the jungle, fighting for democracy or American imperialism, or whatever. If he were a Warrior, then he had the right to drink all he wanted. If he wasn't . . .

“Who knows,” I said.

“No wonder he didn’t want to go to any support groups,” Mark said.

“Who fucking knows,” I said.



Last January I was asked by the security staff to go to the entrance of the shelter to assess a problem case, a guy in a wheelchair. Security wouldn’t let him into the building because he didn’t have papers to prove that he was medically cleared to enter the shelter system. When I saw the guy sitting in the strangely ornate entry foyer (it has marble floors and a hand-painted ceiling), I knew why they called me. He was in a wheelchair, had no arms and no legs, and wore a loose cotton hospital gown that was open to the waist, revealing a still-oozing stomach wound. He was distressingly thin, had black curly hair, and looked Italian. A teddy bear was in his lap. A sparkly heart-shaped balloon, with the words “I LOVE YOU” printed on it in expansive letters, was attached by a string to the back of his wheelchair. “I’m Richie Vecchio,” he said, smiling at me. He appeared to be in no distress.

I wheeled him down the dark hall to the waiting room. The security guards looked at us dubiously—all they knew was that he wasn’t authorized to come in. I looked closely at his hospital bracelet. It indicated that he had been an inpatient at Bellevue for the last four months.

“What unit?” I said.

“Medical,” Richie said. “I was in an accident,” he said happily.

I told him that they wouldn’t let him into the shelter unless he got a form from a doctor stating that he was medically stable.

“You better go back to the hospital. Then you can come back here,” I said.

“Oh, I’m not going back there,” he said. “I’ve been there for four months.”

As a legal matter, I explained, they weren’t going to let him in the shelter.

“Oh, that’s okay,” he said, reassuring me. “I’m just happy to be out of the hospital.”

“Did you sign yourself out?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said with satisfaction.

“But where will you go?”

“Oh, I’ll figure something out,” he said.

I started in on the legalese I’ve been trained with: “It is of course your right to leave the hospital, but I strongly urge you . . .” when he interrupted me.

“It’s all right, man, I’m just happy to be free,” Richie said. “But I was wondering, do you think you could let me stay in the building long enough so I could recharge my wheelchair? The batteries don’t last long in the cold.”

He had spotted the electrical outlet in the corner. He pushed his chin down into his chest and engaged a button on a metal plate that lay on his collarbone. The wheelchair whirred forward.

“See the cord in the back? Could you plug it in?” he said. “It takes about forty-five minutes to charge up.” I plugged in the cord.

“Is your wound okay?”

“Jeez,” he observed, looking down at it for the first time. “I guess it is oozing a little.”

“What happened to you anyway?” I said.

“Lost my limbs in a motorcycle accident. My fault,” he said. “I’m an addict. Heroin, coke, everything. Now I’m just on methadone, and a ton of medications.” It was as if he were talking about varieties of ice cream.

He directed me to a pouch on the back of his wheelchair. In it was a hospital paper that said he had hepatitis and HIV. There were about fifteen bottles of medications in there.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the hospital?”

“No way!” he said almost violently. “Four months is enough. They won’t take me back anyway.”

“Let me see if I can find anything for you,” I said.

There are, in New York City, strange entities called drop-in centers. They are intended to work as adjuncts to the city shelter system. They are meant, by design, to assist those who aren’t medically cleared or deemed “appropriate” for the regular system. That is, they serve those poor souls who have been rejected by the shelter system. The drop-in centers provide only the most minimal “shelter”: usually they are a couple of basement rooms in a church. Contractually they are not allowed to provide beds. The clients of the drop-in centers sit on chairs all night long.

I called the four drop-in centers in Manhattan. I made my usual mistake, which is to ask if they have beds.

“You mean *chairs*,” said an annoyed voice at the first drop-in center.

“Yes, chairs,” I said.

“No chairs,” the voice said, and hung up the phone.

I called the next drop-in center. “Do you have any . . . er . . . slots?”

“You mean *chairs*,” said the voice. “No, didn’t you notice? It’s cold outside. No chairs.” Click.

No chairs were to be had at the other drop-in centers either.

When I returned to the waiting room there were three more clients waiting. Normally the guys in the waiting room never talk to one another, instead sitting silently with their heads down, avoiding eye contact at all costs. But these three were all talking to Richie. One was sharing his sandwich with him, and another was reading him a story from the newspaper.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t find anything for you. Do you have any money?” I said.

“One hundred and thirty dollars,” said Richie, precisely.

The last resort for shelter that night was the Bowery flophouses. Usually they charge ten dollars a night for a room with walls made of chicken wire. I called the usual places: The Palace, The Rio, The Sunshine. None of them had beds. “It’s cold outside,” the voices on the other end of the line said. My last call was to the YMCA, ten blocks away.

“We have a bed, but you gotta get here quick,” said the attendant.

“How much?”

“Sixty-five dollars a night.” In New York, even the Ys are expensive.

“Oh, that’s fine,” Richie said, after I told him about the Y. “I’ll go there.”

“But you only have enough for two nights.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry, man. I’ll figure something out.”

He depressed his chin and engaged the button. He rolled out of the waiting room. “See you guys later. Thanks a lot,” he said, nodding to his instant friends.

We left the shelter. Smoke or steam or whatever it is that emanates from the city’s innards was billowing up through an open manhole to

the surface of First Avenue. The wind had picked up. It must have been twenty degrees outside. Richie told me he had a jacket in his pouch, and I put it on him. It wasn't much more than a windbreaker. All he had on underneath was the cotton hospital gown. I pointed him in the direction of the McBurney YMCA.

"Do you think the wheelchair will make it?"

"Probably. We'll see. It looks like it's downhill," he said, laughing. He headed out into the street.

Then he stopped and shouted back to me. "See ya later! Thanks a lot, man. Thanks a lot, Charlie, I mean it. I really appreciate everything you've done for me. You're a great social worker or doctor, or whatever you are."

He whirred across First Avenue, almost getting hit by a bus. He whirred unsteadily down one side of the avenue, in the few feet between the parked cars and the oncoming traffic. The last I saw of him was the back of his wheelchair, the heart-shaped balloon bouncing in the wind, as he cut through a cloud of steam coming out of the street.

For some reason, watching that last image of Richie heading to oblivion, I thought suddenly of Henry. Sure, Henry was in a lot of pain, but he had his arms and legs, and he didn't have hepatitis or AIDS or a methadone addiction or an oozing stomach wound. He had intelligence and money and a family that loved him—albeit in a difficult way—and he had his physical health, and he could have fucking survived, I thought. I was sure of it now, he could have made it. Dammit, Henry, I thought, on the corner of East 29th Street and First Avenue. You had everything to live for.



I've worked a lot of holidays at Bellevue: Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Labor Day. Homelessness doesn't stop on holidays, but it does slow down. I've noticed that there aren't too many applicants for shelter on the holidays. I think the clients know it's a little tough to be in a homeless shelter on Christmas, and they stay away.

I watched the millennium come in at the shelter, saw the digital clock turn to 12:00:01 a.m., 2000. Here at the shelter, nothing changed. No one celebrated. Homelessness in the new millennium seemed to be just about the same as it was in the last one.

But the holiday I'll always remember was last July 4th. The shelter, about fifty yards from the East River, is a great spot to watch the fireworks from. The explosives are set off in barges in the middle of the river. The city closes down FDR Drive for the night, and the crowds arrive two or three hours before the display to get a good view. At Bellevue, we have the same view all to ourselves.

Last year I started watching the fireworks from the shelter waiting room. There was nobody in the room but me, and I looked down on the vast and noisy crowds on the streets. The crowd had swelled to about fifty yards thick, packed in behind police barricades. I watched the psychedelic explosions for half an hour and then went back to my office.

From my office window I could see the massive second wing of the building. About a hundred windows in all faced me across the garbage-strewn courtyard. As the fireworks continued, I noticed that there were some faces peering out of some of the windows. At first it was too dark to see clearly, but as the side of the building lit up for a few seconds in pink or green or purple after the more-impressive explosions, I could see that there were dozens and dozens of faces—almost all of them black—looking out of the windows. It was like a delayed strobe: every twenty seconds or so, I could see those peering heads, each time lit with a different color. As I stared longer, and my eyes adjusted to the strobe, I could read the expressions on the faces. They all had the same expression, and it was an odd look, one that I'd never seen before at the shelter, where most people try to be as numb as possible. It was an expression of shy longing, a wish to be a part of something that was unavailable to them. America, it seemed, was a party they could observe but not attend. In a moment, I realized how strangely and cruelly exhilarating, how terribly and punishingly great, it was to work at the shelter.

And across the courtyard, there was still that longing on those faces. They wanted to merge into those streaming lights over Brooklyn. All of them, I thought, every single one of the residents of the black chair—Leif, the Warrior, Richie, Henry—they all wanted to embrace the green light. All of them had songs they sang, songs in the midst of despair—songs about mythical places like Cheyenne and Vietnam

and about bobbing red balloons . . . there is something much greater out there somewhere . . . and perhaps somehow, some way, someday



When I drive home after leaving the Bellevue shelter at midnight, my thirteen-hour circuit at homeless shelters done for the day, I usually feel pretty good. I feel like I've accomplished something, given something, perhaps, to the people in Manhattan who have schizophrenia. I've taken my ocd and done something constructive with it. Often as I drive through the trafficless streets of the city at midnight, I feel light, elevated, joyous. Yes, joyous. I think it's an elation that goes beyond the Prozac coursing through my veins. On my way home I stop at the all-night gas station on the highway near the George Washington Bridge and fill up my car. As the gas flows through the nozzle into the tank, sometimes I see myself somersaulting in the air and see myself spinning up into the night sky. I see myself go farther and farther up. Eventually I am way above New York, attached to earth only by the hose from the gas pump, which has magically reeled out to be a mile long. I look down at the city below me, with its millions of blinking lights. Manhattan looks like a toy, a miniature model of a real city. I dance and spin for a while up in the atmosphere, where, I notice, it has just started to snow. Small flakes of white fall on my black leather jacket. I do one more spin and then the gas pump hose retracts and I am pulled gently back to Route 4 in New Jersey. When I hit the earth my tank is full.

"Have a good night," the attendant says to me after I pay him.

"I will," I say emphatically.

Sometimes, horribly, I think this: I am glad Henry died, and I am glad I have ocd. It has allowed me to do this work. I am a more troubled but a more effective person as a result of ocd. Without this work, I would be worthless and boring. ocd and Henry saved me from being ordinary.