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## Down and Out in Boston

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*Boston Globe*

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## Down and Out in Boston

*Jack Thomas*

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**A**s shadows of the winter night draw near, Rubbish and I leave Emilio's on Tremont Street where he has been describing, over black coffee, how his addiction to booze has cost him his job and his family and has knocked him overboard into the abyss we call homelessness.

Braced against a bitter wind and an icy rain that has blackened streets, we head north on Tremont and then east along Milford, passing gentrified brownstones and chatting as we sidestep the puddles that polka-dot the brick sidewalk.

Suddenly, Rubbish stops.

"I gotta take a leak," he says. "Cover my back."

Unsure as to my responsibilities as lookout, I glance up and down Milford Street, grateful to see there are no other witnesses as Rubbish slips into the alley at 4-A Milford and urinates against the brick wall of someone's home, describing at the same time the decadence of Boston's shelters for the homeless, especially Pine Street Inn.

"It's a [expletive] nightmare," he says from the alley. "I'd rather sleep in the banks. You go to Pine Street, and you'll see hell on [expletive] earth. A lot of guys don't go near shelters 'cause you need a [expletive] Thompson machine gun to get through the neighborhood, and you get bullied . . . and the shelters are depressing and dangerous. You can get crabs there or lice or [expletive] scabies or whatever. And alcohol attacks the lungs, so in the morning, everybody's got the dry heaves and is trying to throw up, or not throw up, 'cause 70 percent of the people there are alcoholics, and the rest are coke freaks who take advantage of the drunks when they're down and out. If you want a bed, you gotta get there by four o'clock in the afternoon and that means you end up going out of your [expletive] mind sitting around with nothing to do, and everybody belching and puking.

"The shelters suck," he says, emerging from the alley and zipping his trousers as we head east.

"At Pine Street, there could be a tuberculosis epidemic in the bathroom. Not that it smells like a pissy barroom, but it's like you're walking into a cloud of chloroform pneumonia gas or something, and it's disgusting. And your life expectancy? Terrible. If you watch *National Geographic*, what a lion does is pick out the weakest, and

*Jack Thomas is a reporter for the Boston Globe, in which this article first appeared, on February 12, 1992. Reprinted with permission.*

that's what happens at shelters. Behind Fort Point [shelter] there's the channel, and I know a guy who had no family or nothin', and he drowned in it. They said he had a seizure, but I know he got [expletive] pushed, but nobody asked any questions, 'cause it's not like [expletive] John F. Kennedy fell into the river and died.

"Now stay out of this neighborhood at night," he says along Shawmut Avenue, "and over there," he says, pointing his cane toward Peter's Park. "Stay out of there day or night 'cause it's a [expletive] war zone, and if you want cheap clothes and style ain't important," he says, directing his cane toward Harry the Greek's, "that's where hoboes buy their clothes."

We are in the heart of Skid Row, at Washington and Dover Street, or East Berkeley, as it's been renamed in an effort to disguise the fact that for decades it's been the main drag of Boston's bowery, a nether world where bums and beggars wander streets that lead nowhere, occasionally seeking refuge in doorways to avoid the ill winds that always blow in Skid Row.

Trudging along Dover, a block from Pine Street Inn, we come upon an old black man sitting on the curb in an alcoholic stupor and staring into the hubcap of a 1984 Nissan. Despite the freezing rain, he is wearing no hat and no coat, and he is malnourished and emaciated and shivering badly.

"How're ya doing, old-timer?" says Rubbish, leaning down.

"I'm cold, man," he says, shaking violently. "I'm jes' [expletive] cold."

We lift him out of the gutter. He weighs, perhaps, 120 pounds, and he hangs suspended between us for a moment, unable to straighten his legs because he is so cold.

"An' I los' my [expletive] hat, man."

From the gutter, I pluck his black stocking hat, which is heavy with rain and stained with phlegm.

"Drop it, man," says Rubbish. "We gotta get 'im inside."

"I'm so [expletive] cold, man. I'm gonna git pneumonia."

We loop his bony arms over our shoulders. His teeth are chattering and his head shaking from the effects of alcohol and icy rain. As we head toward Pine Street, pedestrians make a swath to avoid contact with three men who are unshaven and unkempt and staggering along, ragged, dank, and malodorous.

"You're in good hands with Allstate," says Rubbish, in a feeble effort at humor.

The drunk glares at him.

"You sound like [expletive] Mutual of Omaha."

Turning onto Harrison Avenue, the old man's knee slips to the pavement as Rubbish stumbles, having gagged from the nauseating stench of dirty clothes, body odor, rain, and whiskey.

"They gotta give me a hat," says the drunk. "I know they will. And they gotta take me in. I'm so [expletive] cold, I'm automatic."

As we round the corner and head up the alley, the door to Pine Street Inn is thrown open, and out rushes an aide with a wheelchair to rescue another drunk passed out in a puddle atop his crutches under a sign that says, "Pine Street Inn." Down the alley, an old white man ignores the fuss, tilts back his head, and, through a cloth, filters into his mouth the contents of a twelve-ounce plastic container with a Citgo label. It is CH<sub>3</sub>-OH, methanol, or wood alcohol, otherwise known as dry gas.

The Pine Street Inn is where Boston warehouses its homeless, including chronic alcoholics, drug addicts, and mentally ill people whose "deinstitutionalization" has saved millions for taxpayers. With the mental health budget having been reduced by

\$50 million, Pine Street now provides beds for 763 people a night, or 39 percent of the shelter beds in Boston, and an overwhelmed staff is struggling to cope with what amounts to the state's largest de facto mental institution.

Upon entering, the three of us are frisked for drugs and weapons, a search that fails to uncover an eight-inch knife given to me by a friend who knows the dangers of the street.

To the left and right are rooms the size of a school cafeteria that are reminiscent of Dickens novels depicting the institutional degradation of the poor in nineteenth-century London.

In the men's room, the air is fetid and the floor and walls are filthy. In the common rooms are more than a hundred men in dank clothing who are not used to shaving every day, nor every other day, and while a few play checkers, most sit along the walls with hands folded in their laps, staring straight ahead. Some are engaged in animated conversations with themselves. Many more have passed out or fallen asleep on tables, chairs, benches, and bare floor.

Pinned to the wall are leaflets, urging men to sign up for a talent program called the Gong Show. On the floor, the water trickling into a drain is stained with blood, and a resident cautions not to step in toxic waste. A man on crutches decides it's easier to urinate in his trousers than struggle to the men's room. Another is puking into a paper cup.

A moment later, yet another old man, seated with his hands in his pockets, passes out and falls forward, his head hitting the floor like a melon, his brow splitting severely enough to require medical attention. Within three hours, because of injuries or fights, two ambulances are called as are two police cars. Amid the chaos, in a corner near the door sits a small, old man who has passed out in a sitting position, wearing a jacket that says "Jamaica Plain."

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### **This Way Down**

There's no way to prepare for a week on Skid Row.

There's no way to condition your taste buds for the stale baloney sandwiches, no way to fortify yourself for the insults while panhandling at Copley Square, and no way to compose yourself for the ever-present racial hostility that boils to the surface at mealtime and in the showers at Pine Street Inn and on the long and sullen and mostly silent bus ride to the Long Island Shelter. There's no way to inoculate yourself against the risk of disease while living among men whose hacking coughs break the stillness of night. And there's no way to inure yourself to the constant threat of violence or the erratic behavior of someone like Quiet Man, who is convinced he hears the Chinese burrowing through Earth to Boston, which is why he wanders into the Red Line from time to time to alert commuters that the station is about to collapse because the Chinese are getting close.

Living inconspicuously among the homeless for a week is easy if you don't cut your hair for two months and you don't shave for ten days and you dress in a tattered German field jacket. By the third day, I looked so down and out commuters averted their eyes, old friends failed to recognize me, and at Faneuil Hall, as I walked by a table, a woman clutched her purse. A cashier at Dunkin' Donuts accepted a dollar bill from me with thumb and forefinger, convinced it was contagious, and an old bum panhandling on Essex Street greeted me like a fellow traveler. "Hi, buddy," he said, without asking for change.

A census in December counted 3,893 homeless people in Boston. Half are single men, 37 percent are families, and 12 percent single women, according to a study by the National Conference of Mayors, and 48 percent are black, 23 percent are veterans, 40 percent are addicted to drugs, and 29 percent are mentally ill.

However difficult life on the street is for men, it is worse for women. As Kathleen Hirsch pointed out in *Songs from the Alley*, her highly praised book about life on the streets of Boston, while men are accustomed to banding together and learning to survive in the military service and on jobs requiring physical labor and even in prison, women who live in the open and lack such experience are far more likely to be victims of assault, robbery, and rape. A rape crisis center reported recently that a homeless woman staggered in after midnight, having been raped twice within several hours by different men in different parts of the city.

At a time when government assistance to the poor has been cruelly reduced, what has kept many homeless people alive is an army of men and women of conscience who donate money and also time every week at shelters and at soup kitchens. At the Church of the Advent and at Saint John the Evangelist in particular, volunteers serving meals to the hungry and homeless do so, even in the face of rudeness, with relentless good will.

Homeless men survey the shelters for a place to live the way the rest of us survey the cities and suburbs. Just as Hingham is more attractive because of the seacoast, so is the Long Island Shelter, and just as Lincoln is more appealing for its safety, so, too, is the gospel mission house on Kingston Street, and just as slum housing, for some, is the only option, so, too, in the world of shelters, a night at Pine Street Inn is the last stop.

Only a fool would underestimate the dangers. At Fort Point Shelter, favored by younger alcoholics, or nouveau drunks, as they are called, a young black man, handsome and articulate and once a high school coach, lifted his head from the table where he had been sleeping in the middle of the day and said, slowly, "This place is literally, *literally* a madhouse."

Unable to endure the threats of violence and racism and disease at shelters, some men choose equally dangerous accommodations, like the heated grilles adjacent to Boston Public Library. At Charlesgate East, under the highway from Park to Storrow Drive, a man has made a home of space under the bridge. With the roar of traffic a few inches over his head, he sleeps on a makeshift mattress along the girder, about five feet off the ground, in a sleeping bag with army blanket. Along the beam, over his head, are kitchen utensils, candles, mirrors, three boxes of Chinese food "to go," and his only concession to "art," a *Playboy* centerfold.

It is a mistake to generalize about urban hoboes, for while three out of ten are mentally ill, it is not uncommon to hear conversations about French cuisine or the Israeli economy, and many of the homeless are fascinating characters, like Beret, a chef and gentleman, and Blondie, his pal from New York, and the Snorer, who slept in a bunk above me at the mission house in the Combat Zone, and Hiawatha, the Latin American with an American-Indian haircut, and Funny Man, the entertaining beggar, and Notre Dame, who knows everybody if not everything, and Mary Book-keeper, who's off to Phoenix, and Quiet Man, and Orange Hat, who plays piano like Thelonious Monk, and Mountain Dew, the kindly alcoholic from Lexington, and Rubbish, who scavenges alleys and plays classical guitar.

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## Funny Man's Man

Among the most entertaining panhandlers in Boston is Funny Man, a slender, quick-witted black guy who can be found many mornings at the Park Street kiosk, where he and I are greeting commuters as they climb the stairs from the Red and Green lines.

From a local shelter where he sleeps, Funny Man makes his way to the kiosk by 6:30 and stays four hours. Once a trolley arrives, and as commuters ascend, Funny Man moves side to side, sizing up prospects as to which are generous, which stingy.

Dressed in black stocking cap and clothes that make it clear he is a man of the streets, Funny Man's only tool, in addition to banter, is a plastic cup from McDonald's in which he keeps several coins that he shakes like castanets.

His repertoire is a finely tuned, well choreographed monologue of political wit, social observation, weather updates, and old-fashioned hustle.

As a well-dressed gentleman climbs the stairs, Funny Man approaches, shaking the coins, and, with split-second timing, he dips his left knee so Mr. Commuter cannot miss the cup.

"Muh MA-A-A-N," says Funny Man.

Resigned, the gentleman drops fifty cents into the cup. Funny Man dips his knee even deeper, smiles, and, by way of thanks, says with even greater emphasis, "Muh MAAA-A-I-N Man."

Most commuters climb the stairs with head down, trying to ignore Funny Man, and many others glower, for it is annoying to give a beggar money, as Nietzsche observed, and annoying not to.

"No spare change," says a white man, who strides out the door to Boston Common, letting in a blast of frigid wind and a swirl of crisp oak leaves.

"Den, how 'bout a buck for luck?" yells Funny Man.

"My MA-A-A-N's coming," says Funny Man to a student who walks by.

To a man in a \$400 camel overcoat, "Hey, dude?"

Camel Coat glares and then marches out the door.

Funny Man smiles.

"He looked at me like I was stupid."

Jiggling coins at the approach of a schoolgirl, Funny Man says, "Can you see it in your heart to help a homeless man?"

"No thanks," she says, passing out to Boston Common.

Funny Man looks at me, startled.

"She act like I'm 'posed to be giving *her* change," he says.

"Button up, pretty lady, it's cold out there," he urges a young woman who buys a *Globe* for thirty-five cents, after which she turns and gives the fifteen cents change to Funny Man.

"Thank you, pretty lady," he says.

"Now that," says news dealer Robert Siegel, "that's what drives me crazy. I mean, why wouldn't she give me the fifteen cents? It's like a knife in the heart."

It's also an irony of the street that Siegel, who has a job, doesn't earn as much money as Funny Man, who has no job — proof, perhaps, that Charles Lamb was right, that beggars are the only free souls in the universe.

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## **Shelter and Devotion**

At Kingston House, a gospel mission at the edge of Chinatown and the Combat Zone, it is 7:30, and about seventy-five men are awaiting breakfast, but not a morsel will pass anyone's lips until Brother Cornelio Lopez delivers his morning devotion.

It's a good deal for everybody. Hungry men are assured a breakfast, Brother Lopez a congregation. Out of courtesy, some remain awake through his sermon, although it is impossible to determine among bowed heads who is praying, who has nodded off.

A lot of these men, as Brother Lopez observes in his Sunday sermon, "don' even know they on erf." It takes a moment for his congregation to realize that he is talking about the planet "erf."

Once a street person himself, Brother Lopez is popular among the men, although he runs a tight ship that permits, as he puts it, no alcohol, no drugs, no cussin', and no pornographies.

"I know you here to get out of the cold," says Brother Lopez, leaning on the Hitachi television, "but I hope you also here for the devotion, right? Amen. And so, we not tired and sleepy and we not gonna read the newspaper, amen?"

A few men mutter "amen."

"Good to see all of ya here, amen, praise the Lord."

After prayer, and with accompaniment from an elderly gentleman at the upright piano, Brother Lopez leads in singing Hymn 202, "Love Lifted Me," a rendition remarkable in that not one man ever hits a proper note, not even accidentally.

For a congregation of men who have struggled with alcoholism, the title Brother Lopez has chosen for his sermon is an ironic one, "Sour Grapes," except that what Brother Lopez is addressing is jealousy. After reciting a scripture from Peter, Brother Lopez reads from a pamphlet about jealousy that includes reference to a sixty-nine-carat diamond in the window of a Fifth Avenue jeweler — and here, he stumbles.

"Carta . . . Cartara . . ."

There is a pause.

"Cartier's?" yells Blondie, who grew up in a well-to-do family in New York.

Startled that a homeless brother can identify a Fifth Avenue jeweler, the men look to Brother Lopez, anticipating his wrath.

"Gimme that name agin?"

Blondie hesitates.

"Cartier?" he says, this time in a soft voice.

"Thank you very much."

"I'm sorry," says Blondie.

"No, ah 'preciate that. If I pronounced it wrong, I stand to be corrected. Never get to the place where you think you can't be corrected, amen? They's something wrong wit' you if you know it all and you don't, amen? That's why I axed the question."

Brother Lopez continues.

"The huge diamond was displayed in the window of . . . What's that word again?"

"Cartier's," yell five or six men.

"Right, Cartier's. Must be mah Southern accent, amen?"

For the rest of the sermon, the men are attentive. By his humility, Brother Lopez has won, if not their souls, at least their respect.

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## Everyone Is John Doe

On the street, where anonymity reigns, everybody is John Doe, and everybody lives where he slept last night, and his Social Security number is the first nine digits that come to mind.

At Long Island Shelter, it is an hour before “lights out” and Blondie is stretched out on his bunk when his name is called over the loudspeaker, advising him to report to the office for counseling in getting a job and straightening out his life.

The conference begins with a warning.

“I’m a vocation counselor at a college in Boston,” the adviser says, “so you can’t [expletive] me.”

Blondie nods obediently, then gives the adviser a fake name, fake address, fake date of birth, fake age, and fake Social Security number, and swears that he never uses drugs, never drinks, and is diligent about looking for work. When the session is complete, they shake hands, and the counselor thanks Blondie for his forthrightness.

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## A Degree in Hustling

Meet Beret, a courtly gentleman with degrees from Harvard Extension School and from a culinary institute in France. Having grown up in a family that owned a Boston restaurant, in years gone by, Beret used to deliver day-old food to Saint Francis House, a soup kitchen in the Combat Zone.

Now, he lives there.

“This is embarrassing. I’ve never been arrested, never do drugs, always worked hard, and always paid the bills, but I’ll tell you, if this can happen to me, it can happen to you.”

Beret had been chef for eight years at an exclusive Beacon Hill club for women until it closed in 1989, giving employees four days’ notice, no severance.

Unable to find work in Boston, Beret headed for Key West, and because he’d been educated in Europe and had a commendable record, he assumed he’d have no problem finding a job.

On the bus to Key West, however, an elderly woman pickpocketed seven people, including Beret, from whose knapsack she filched \$4,800. “I called home,” says Beret, thirty-seven, “but my mother decided this would be a good learning experience.”

It has been.

Now he’s got a degree in how to hustle.

“If you’re carrying a backpack, people trade advice about the scams, how to file for food stamps or welfare, how to get a crazy check, which in Florida means if you act crazy and live in the street, they give you like \$680 a month. There are people who make a living this way. They live in shelters and the weather’s perfect, and to them, that’s a wonderful life. And because they eat at soup kitchens, they can sell their food stamps for fifty cents on the dollar.”

What Beret wanted, however, was not charity, but work.

“After a few days camping out, though, you *look* like you’re camping out, and that gets negative responses from employers.”

And so he spent his first Thanksgiving Day away from his family, although eating turkey dinner at a soup kitchen with drunks and drug addicts took a toll on his psyche.

"It hit me internally. When I ran out of the pocket change I had, I found myself in a soup line, and coming from a family that never went without, it was degrading."

He met a pal, Blondie. They hitched to Miami and slept under Interstate 395. Still unable to find work, they walked forty miles and slept at a Salvation Army in Fort Lauderdale, where there were no jobs, either, except dishwashing at \$3.85 an hour, and even then there were thirty Haitians ahead of them. Hopping freight trains and conning their way aboard buses, they made it to Boston, where Blondie and Beret now eat at soup kitchens and sleep at shelters and hope for a job.

"I'm embarrassed," says Beret. "I come from a hard-working family. Dad graduated from MIT, developed two electronic businesses, and Mom lives off the interest. She thinks I got a little too much when I was young and wants to see me take care of this on my own, and if I stumble, I suppose she'll be there, but I guess she's decided she'd rather I work this out myself."

A few days later, Beret reports to a dental clinic for free care. Told he must have a tooth extracted, Beret alerts the dentist that his jaw had been broken and that there are pins near the tooth. "No problem," says the dentist. "We'll twist the tooth the other way."

Unfortunately, however, the dentist reversed the negative and in performing the extraction, he twisted the tooth the wrong way, breaking Beret's jaw once again and forcing him to spend three days recuperating at Boston City Hospital.

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### **Treasures in the Trash**

"Step into my office," says Rubbish, as we turn off Arlington Street to scavenge trash barrels in the Back Bay along an eight-block alley that runs from Arlington Street to Massachusetts Avenue between Beacon and Marlborough streets.

He's thirty-five, has a salt-and-pepper beard, plays classical guitar, adopted Timothy Leary as his boyhood hero, and once earned \$200 a day repairing Porsches, until alcoholism got the better of him, and he lost everything and took to the streets seven years ago. Sober for six days, Rubbish is staying at a Salvation Army shelter, awaiting a bed at a treatment center.

"Sometimes, I luck out," he says, heading for trash cans in back of a Marlborough Street brownstone. "I go into what I call ritzy alleys and you'd be amazed at what people throw away. If I owned a house, I'd never buy furniture, honest to God, 'cause people throw away beautiful mahogany stuff. I've found Frye boots, Mexican artifacts. Once I found three rolls of dimes. There are days when these alleys are like Filene's Basement."

At the rear of a Beacon Street apartment he spots a Franklin stove and, nearby, a butcher-block table, and ponders whether to hide them and return later for them.

"I use this stick," he says, referring to his cane, "so I don't have to get my hands filthy. Plus, if I run into the wrong guy, it's hard cherry so I can rap 'im over the head." His only other tool, besides his wits, is a razor to slit plastic bags.

At No. 216 Marlborough, he finds silver rings.

"A stewardess lives here," he says, poking among bobby pins and barrettes. "I can tell by the type of stuff she's been throwing away."

Back and forth across the alley he zigs and zags, lifting lids and slitting bags and then probing with his cane.

"You heard of people, like, throwing stuff away with the trash? I've found dollar bills, \$15 once, \$17 another time. I got the shock of my life once when I opened up a can and what do you think is looking up at me? A [expletive] rat!"

As he works, he philosophizes about life in the streets.

"I used to live in Brattleboro, which was so [expletive] boring that one night I fell asleep in a movie and nobody woke me up. That's how boring it was, so I stayed all night till morning when the liquor store opened across the street.

"The economy? Well, it's a complex issue, but basically, I think it sucks. It's the rich protecting their interests at the expense of the poor. And Weld? Born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Got no freakin' idea what it's like to be poor."

Rubbish decides to pass up a dozen albums by Lionel Richie and Tina Turner, then takes a break, slipping between a Saab and a Nissan XE to urinate against a tire.

"One day I was going through a barrel — you won't believe this — and I found, from Pier 1 Imports, a bag of brass bells from India. I guess you use them to call your cat, and I tried to sell 'em on Newbury Street, at a Tibetan place, but he wants handmade stuff. So I ended up bringing 'em back to Pier 1, and guess what? They gave me a store credit, 367 bucks."

Before alcoholism kicked in when he was eighteen, Rubbish had practiced classical guitar three hours a day. "Just scales," he says, peering into a barrel, "and then I'd study a piece, like Etude in B minor by Bach, transposed from piano to guitar."

For all its grubbiness, scavenging, at least among street people, is more prestigious, or more accurately, not as disreputable, as collecting cans, or canning, as it's called.

"What I'm going for is junk, 'cause that's where the money is, aluminum, brass, copper," says Rubbish. "But if I have to start pushing a freakin' supermarket carriage, well, I just ain't gonna do it. I just ain't going [expletive] canning."

At Long Island Shelter, at dinner, the men are wondering why a woman would be homeless, that is, why she would not use her wiles, somehow, to save herself the humiliation of the street. "At the very least," says Notre Dame, "she could marry an Air Force lieutenant. They're stupid."

At a nearby table, Cat Woman, so named because she feeds wild animals, is singing hymns and reading from tracts in an effort to convert a homeless man to the Seventh-Day Adventist church.

"See that guy two tables down in the red shirt," says Notre Dame. "He was thrown out of Kingston House."

For what? someone wants to know.

"For masturbating," says Notre Dame.

"As if no one else did it," says Beret.

Upstairs, there's not much intimacy to the sleeping accommodations. It's a room with 132 beds divided into groups of four, each group separated by four-foot walls freshly painted blue with red trim. Each man gets a cot, a pillow, two sheets, and one blanket, or two, if you can con the supply man, which Beret and I succeed in doing.

"Thank you," Beret and I say, and from the half dozen Latin guys in line in back of us, there is a snicker and snide remarks about the dumb white guys who say "thank you."

The next morning, it is still dark when the bus clammers along the coast of Long Island, and with the ever-present racial tensions no one talks till we reach Quincy Shore Drive, when Beret, who is white, shifts in his seat and allows his coat to brush against a sullen black man.

“Don’t touch me again, man,” he says in a threatening voice.

“It’s clean,” says Beret.

“You don’t understand,” says the black man bitterly. “I don’t want you to touch me at all, no way, no how, understand?”

It is the last conversation until the bus arrives at dawn at Albany Street.

On Tuesday night, before the doors open to the soup kitchen at Church of the Advent, there are sixty people shivering in the darkness along Brimmer Street, including Mary, Mary Bookkeeper, who has lost her job, can’t find another, and is off to Phoenix tomorrow by bus for a new life.

“It’s easy to get discouraged. When I went to apply for a job as a teller, do you know how many were ahead of me? One hundred and thirteen!”

Over a soup-kitchen supper of pasta and ham, she confesses that she doesn’t have a college degree. “But look at the way the banks are folding. They’re all run by college graduates, so what good is it?”

She is alternately streetwise and naive. She says, for example, that it is bad for homeless people to sleep on the vents outside the public library because, among other reasons, they roast on one side and freeze on the other. A moment later, however, she looks at a man from Pine Street Inn and says, “Is it true that everybody at the shelters is pickled?”

When conversation turns to politics, her voice hardens in the bitterness many homeless people feel toward President Bush.

“His middle name,” she says, “is asinine.”

Before departing, Mary carefully counts from her purse a dollar in coins to drop into the can as donation for dinner, and then, assuming that no one is watching, she takes a roll of bread, wraps it in a napkin, and places it in her purse for tomorrow’s long ride to Phoenix and her new life.

Having spent last night outdoors at the Brookline Village T stop in temperatures below 10 degrees, Mountain Dew, a twenty-seven-year-old alcoholic, is as down and out as it gets around Boston. He is tall, handsome, and mannerly, and, if you catch him sober, he is articulate enough to explain why he is an alcoholic.

“I blame Nancy Reagan,” he says, sitting in a Tremont Street coffee shop, unable to stop shivering.

As the son of a well-to-do family in Lexington, Mountain Dew is baffled himself by his misfortunes.

“How did this happen? I can’t figure it. I’ve got four older brothers and sisters, all college graduates. But I got thrown out of junior high, so they sent me to private school, Saint Sebastian’s Country Day, but they threw me out, too, ’cause we got caught destroying a couple of schools. Extreme aggression towards schoolhouses, they called it.”

The slide began early, when he was about eleven and started using marijuana, then, as the years passed, coke, LSD, and heroin. “And if it wasn’t available in Lexington, it was a short ride to Adams Street, Lowell, where you can get anything.”

As we talk, he shivers, not yet having recovered from his night of pacing the Brookline Village T stop, and he turns aside admonitions that he needs rest.

“I can get by on two or three hours’ sleep a night.”

Although it is not yet eleven, he has already bought the day’s bottle of befuddlement, a pint of vodka and Mountain Dew chaser.

Why not a fifth of vodka, or a quart?

“Too dangerous,” says Mountain Dew. “I might pass out and freeze to death.”

Having lost his job at a printing plant because of alcoholism, Mountain Dew's been living on the streets two years, and survives on SSI payments he's been receiving since a motorcycle accident in 1985.

His last attempt to find work is a bitter memory.

“It was about eight months ago, on Brookline Avenue. They were looking for a garage attendant, and when I got there, there were fifty people in line, old ladies, guys in three-piece suits who looked like they just walked out of the stock exchange. They had 250 applications altogether. Can you believe it? All for a chance to suck exhaust fumes all day.”

Despite the warmth of the coffee shop, Mountain Dew shivers as he describes the pain he gets near his liver when he drinks too much, and then, suddenly, he turns the tables and instead of answering questions, he asks one.

“Why are you writing this story?”

“I don't know. I think governments in Washington and in Massachusetts have abandoned the poor. I don't know whether it's because they don't know what to do, or whether they don't care. A lot of us drive by shelters or walk by homeless people without seeing them. And the numbers are growing so fast, we're becoming numb, and we can't seem to agree on what a society owes its own people when they're down and out. I thought that maybe if the homeless were written about as people instead of abstract numbers, well, it might make a difference.”

Mountain Dew thought about that. He sipped his soda, took a long drag of his Raleigh Extra, and then blew the smoke into the air. Finally, staring at me through bloodshot eyes, he shook his head, and said, “It would take an act of God.” ☹