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## Streets Are for Nobody: Caroline

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## Streets Are for Nobody: Caroline

*Just sixty; worked most of her adult life; now on pension; waiting for elderly housing.*

I went to State Teacher's College when I got a commission in the air force during Korea. I spent eight years in the air force. I was offered a job at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank doing the same thing I did in the air force at a tremendous salary, which I took. I worked there for seven and a half years and came back to Boston because my sister, at that time, had been remarried and she needed me because of problems that she was having. I worked eight years for an insurance company as the assistant treasurer and full-charge bookkeeper for a subsidiary company.

My sister became ill. They had moved to San Francisco with their daughter. She had suffered two heart attacks and she asked me to come out there because she could not control her daughter who was having an emotional problem. I then left my job and went out to San Francisco. During the course of the first year, I worked temporary doing accounting work because I had to be home with her. I had the daughter go to the University of California at Davis, which I paid for. She wanted to be a librarian.

My sister then suffered diabetes. She started losing her eyesight, her kidneys started deteriorating. I kept working as much as I could temporary. [Caroline's sister died and she was hospitalized for depression.] It's been very difficult for me because of heavy medications I take both for physical and mental reasons to have [the] concise thinking that one needs in the accounting work.

My mother died when I was twelve and my father when I was ten. And my sister raised me. My sister was both my mother, my sister, and my best friend. That's why the doctor said that it was too much of an emotional loss, it was my last tie to the family.

[People on fixed income have difficulty getting apartments.]

I went to a Realtor on Marlborough Street who I knew slightly and I explained my situation. I'm on a fixed income. He said, "Caroline, you've got good references and I know you. I wouldn't hesitate to place you. But how can I place you in an apartment building where the landlord next year will raise the rent?" They see you on fixed income, they don't want you because they're not going to get any more money out of you. Plus the fact that if you've been homeless for a period of time, they don't want to touch you.

*Interviewed by Melissa Shook, July 7, 1988, Boston. Reprinted, with permission, from "Streets Are for Nobody: Homeless Women Speak," Boston Center for the Arts, 1991.*

*Melissa Shook is an associate professor in the Art Department, University of Massachusetts at Boston.*

Everybody [else] lives within two or three paychecks of poverty 'cause everybody spends everything they earn. God knows I did when I earned top dollar. I spent it on trips, cars, and my family, my niece particularly.

I think the main thing of being homeless is the loss of esteem, the loss of contributing to people, to the world, doing something constructive. You're treated like a piece of material that has to move to this line, to that line. I believe in rules and regulations. I spent eight years in the air force and I enjoyed rules and regulations. I know with a large group you have to do that. But I think when you're homeless, you can't do it. Because you have no identity. You're just, "You over here. You get up. You can eat now."

And it's sad to lay there at night. Last week there was a woman came, was a nurse, raised children. Unfortunately, she's on a pension, like myself, can't afford a place and she told me, "What am I going to do?" I said, "You'll have to ride it out. And maybe they'll get you into a boardinghouse or maybe your name will come up on a [subsidized housing] list or maybe you'll win Megabucks." And she went crazy the other night. She just couldn't control herself any more. Now, she's at the mental hospital and God knows if she'll be able to snap back.

I've seen them go out of the lobby and two or three cops holding them, taking them out. They bring them to Lindemann Center, dose them up, and they come back like little automatons.

I think the saddest part is to sit and watch someone you know and you like, maybe you don't even have to like them, but to see a person deteriorate right in front of you and you don't have the sources to stop it. I've kind of pulled back because I can't watch people do that any longer.

Half the people won't talk to each other out in public. I had a friend brought over another from the shelter to sit at her table. She [the friend] had to pay and leave because the woman's behavior was so bizarre, everybody in the restaurant was looking at her. So that's why there are very few friendships in the shelter; it's because you don't want to be hurt by them in public, plus you don't want to be hurt yourself by seeing people you like go down the tubes. You can take a lot, but that I think is the one thing you can't take. It's terrible.

I myself have to go to the clinic three mornings a week for treatment. Afterwards, I usually try and get to a movie if I feel that I'm sliding in a depression. Or I go down by the water. I love to look at the water. Or I go to the library and read. Or I go to the museum, look around. I try to keep myself doing normal things, what I would do if I was on a normal retirement and had time to kill. I always try to keep interested in current affairs. I read a great deal. Reading has been my salvation. It's the only thing that has kept me sane. ♪