

An Exquisite Fall From Grace

by gerard varni

He lay on a wooden pallet, which he had placed inside a cardboard box that might have once held a refrigerator. Except the box was labeled “Robotic Endoscopic Surgery System.” His head was propped on a gym bag that contained all his possessions. Outside, it was perhaps 98 degrees. Inside the box, it was at least 20 degrees warmer. It was mid-afternoon. He was trying to sleep, but his body was steaming, seeping perspiration -- *transudation* the doctors called it. Runnels of sweat sang down his face, his arms, from the wellspring of his torrid and saturated head. His hair was sodden, drizzling.

His entire body was soaked, percolating in its own fluid. Even with his aptitude for language, he knew that the word *sweltering* was insufficient. And so he suffered, because he had no place to go. No home, no apartment, no friend's place, not even a homeless shelter. (They were crammed to overflowing with gasping vagrants just like him.) He was on the campus of Harbor - UCLA Medical Center, tucked in a narrow alley between a loading dock and the imaging center.

When he'd lost his job as a copywriter at an advertising agency, he began receiving unemployment checks. He took a room at a cheap motel across the street from the hospital, which is recognized as the city's garrison for indigent, uninsured people seeking medical attention. And then the checks stopped, and he had no place to live. At first he would go the the hospital's emergency room, because it was cooler and he could sleep in a chair. But soon the cacophony

and discord, the wailing and misery, the anguish of people who had nothing, caused him to move outside. He still went to the Emergency Room to use the bathroom and wash himself as best he could. But day and night the place was always teeming with miserable people — hurt and bleeding and coughing and crying. And the average wait time to be seen was 24 hours. The chairs were always full; the stench and despondency were just too much. So he stopped going, unless it was absolutely necessary.

Acquiring food was problematic, and often disappointing. He had to beg. And the answer was often “Fuck you. Get a job,” or “Hey, I got my own problems.” One day a woman gave him two energy bars. He was ecstatic, thanking her until she finally just said “You’re welcome” and walked away. He planned to save them for a morning meal, so he put them in his gym bag, went back to his Robotic Endoscopic Surgery System dwelling and tried to sleep. Suddenly there was chaos inside the box. Hissing and growling and scratching. Two feral cats had burst in, apparently detecting the odor of the food. He tried to fight them off, beat them down, but they tore at him with their teeth, raked his arms with their claws, all the while screeching and snarling. What the hell, he thought, these aren’t cats, they’re monsters. And so he scrambled out of the box and watched as the cats tore through his thin gym bag and took the energy bars. Still shrieking, they ran into the night.

Stunned, he looked around. What had happened? His wife, his children, his house, his job — all gone, all part of his appalling demise. Was it entirely his fault — this calamity, this exquisite fall from grace? And then the horrifying thought came to him. He’d never truly considered the question. He looked down at his bleeding arms, touched his face and felt the wounds. He turned, walked away from the box toward the emergency room, wondering if he needed a tetanus shot. It would be 24 hours before he’d know.

