

In Distress

by J. Mykell Collinz

World class university facilities, historic downtown area, and well maintained residential neighborhoods contributed to the medium market college town's continuing economic vigor. When newly built suburban shopping malls attracted retail shoppers away from downtown businesses, the empty spaces resulting from retail store closures were quickly occupied by theme bars and ethnic restaurants. Most people expected this trend to continue, even as local business failures abruptly accelerated due to a worldwide economic crisis.

June and Art operated a traditional, Japanese style futon business near downtown. They recorded their sales, inventory, and expenses in a single paper notebook. She cut measured pieces of quality fabrics and then sewed them into futon cases, while he stuffed the cases with batts of cotton or wool. When a new store opened on the same block carrying imported, machine made, less expensive futons, the couple were forced to adjust.

Similar to their competition, they purchased machine made futon mats, along with convertible furniture frames made of wood or metal, from globalized wholesale markets. They reorganized their shop space into furniture galleries with product displays, an open office area, and a customer service counter. They even purchased a computer with accounting software to keep track of their more complicated business. When a multinational big box furniture store opened just off the expressway outside the city selling all the same products at greatly reduced prices, they contemplated the possibility of closing their store.

An immediate decision wasn't necessary, however. They had a warehouse full of inventory for which they had pre-paid and they had a lease for their building extending through the next year. Sales

were slow and profit margins low but they weren't losing money. They had zero debts beyond normal operating expenses and they avoided the use of credit by continuing to pre-pay wholesalers for all new purchases.

When the weather turned cold, casual foot traffic became almost nonexistent. Art worked the store by himself during the week while June stayed at home, cutting and sewing in her converted dining room workshop, making yoga bolsters, zabuton, zafu, and buckwheat hull pillows.

There were days when no one entered the store and the phone didn't ring. Art could look out the corner store's windows and, at times, see nearly empty sidewalks in every direction, even though located just one block off Main Street.

Most people on the sidewalk in that area were headed for the American style greasy spoon restaurant across the street on the southwest corner of the intersection. It maintained a steady flow of customers at all hours of the day and night while the fancy European and Asian style restaurants up and down the block appeared busy only at dinner time and on weekends.

June and Art sometimes visited the greasy spoon at three o'clock in the morning on their way home from the bar. It was always packed at that time of the night with a cross-section of locals and transients, including musicians, entertainers, athletes, and intellectuals.

One night, June and Art listened to a loud group talking at the table next to them:

"Everybody seen those rugged looking backpackers? Men, women, children, some with dogs?"

"Yeah, showing up all over town, from who knows where."

"They're in sleeping bags on the sidewalk, pitching tents between buildings, right next to garbage cans."

"They're rainbow people. They gather. Something must be going down."

"Support the students? Occupy the university?"

"These ain't no rainbow people. Last time I checked, rainbow people don't look that bad off. These people are low life drifters, a modern version of it, moving across the land like swarming locust."

"How come there's so many of them?"

"It's just a sign of the times."

"They got camping gear and cell phones and shit, where's the money coming from?"

"Selling dope, LSD. We'll be seeing a lot more acid around town. Some of these people were conceived at Grateful Dead concerts. Their parents dragged them around the country from concert to concert while they were growing up and they haven't stopped living on the road since."

After hearing this, Art didn't over react the next morning when he discovered a big tent had been set up on his store's brick patio facing the popular greasy spoon restaurant across the street to the west. It makes no difference, he told himself, if they camp there for a while. Customers will understand and not be turned away. Plus, he was curious who they were and what they thought they were doing?

He unlocked the door, entered, and switched on the overhead lights. When he connected the wall plug lighting up the red neon, OPEN, sign facing the street, he immediately heard the ting-a-ling of the bells above the door signaling someone's entrance.

"Can we use your bathroom?" A young woman with three children stood by the door waiting for his response.

"Are you the ones living in the tent?" he said: "You can use the bathroom, anyway but I was just wondering."

"We slept there last night but it's not mine. They said I could use it."

"Who said you could use it."

"I don't wanna get them in trouble."

"Nobody's getting in trouble. Go ahead, use the bathroom."

She had a young girl with her, a younger boy, and a baby nursing at her breast: "A girl," she informed.

"Can we look around?" she asked when they came out of the bathroom.

The store had been organized and arranged with children in mind. One of the largest display areas consisted of soft children's furniture and bedding, along with bean bags, poof chairs, stuffed animals, and other stuffed toys.

"My name's Alexandria," she said: "People call me Andy. This here's my daughter Cleopatra, Patty. She's five years old, today. Her little brother, Ptolemy, Tommy, he's three. And my baby, my darling, Nefertiti. I don't know what to call her, yet."

"Are you an Egyptian?"

"I don't know what I am so I can be what I want."

Art remembered when he believed something similar, and he said:
"Where are you from?"

"I ain't from nowhere," she replied: "Where I am, that's my home."

Art accept her presence in the store without further confrontation when a regular customer came in to pickup an order.

"I've seen that women before, without the kids," the customer said: "She's been around for awhile. She's not one of the new ones, the backpackers. They're all over the place. Except the university, which is currently surrounded by police: campus, city, and state. To prevent camping on campus."

"Who are the backpackers?" Art replied: "Where do they come from?"

"This has been building up for a long time. Lack of social programs, mental health facilities, basic education. It's all been privatized. It's run for profit, not for humanity's wellbeing. Even if people have health insurance, the quality of care is poor in many cases, especially with mental health. Where do these people go when they fall through the cracks? They live in the streets, along with the homeless, the unemployed. They become alcoholics and drug addicts."

A second customer, waiting to be helped, interjected:

"Don't forget to mention anarchists, rabblers., and demagogues. They appear together throughout history in times like these. Except today it's global and instantaneous."

The first customer replied:

"A major portion of the American middle class is beginning to fall through the cracks. It's like disaster capitalism, from Naomi Klein's book, *The Shock Doctrine*. They're creating crisis situations to convince people they need the protection of a strong military government with militarized law enforcement agencies. The war on drugs, the war on terror, the war on human diversity, the war on faith in government, the war on taxes. Meanwhile, through privatization, they're making a profit from everything imaginable and they're destroying our country in the process."

When the customers departed, Art checked on the woman, still in the children's furniture area, and said:

"How do you eat?"

"People feed us," she replied: "The church basement has good food but it's getting too crowded. I won't go to the homeless shelter no more, they wanna take my babies away from me. Same with assisted housing and children's court. I don't trust none of them people."

He cooked oatmeal and boiled water for coffee on an electric hotplate in the office. Along with sliced apples, bananas, dates, peanuts, and walnuts, he offered them milk and honey to go with their hot cereal.

When they had finished eating, he said:

"You can come in and visit any time you want during the day when I'm open but you can't live in the store. It just wouldn't work. It's my place of business."

"I know that," she said: "The tent's fine, for now. It's got sleeping bags and a solar heater. And they said I could use it for as long as I want."

"Who said?"

"They were wearing those masks."

"Guy Fawkes masks?"

"Yeah. They're putting up tents all around because they know more people will be coming. But I'm already here so they said I could use this one."

Art tried to imagine the future as he swept the carpet by the door. When he opened the door to sweep the leaves and debris back outside, a cat ran in. It was a young female being chased by two big tom cats, Art immediately recognized. She was smaller and fluffy, with a sweet, innocent face. The male cats were large, sleek, and muscular, with puffy faces and lust in their eyes. He closed the door before they could enter.

