

A Borrowed Barrow

by John Olson

It was a battered, creaky, rickety old thing, this wheelbarrow. It had two wooden handles with cracks running through the wood, a fat rubber wheel and a deep tray encrusted with the mud and plaster and grout that it had transported through decades of heavy use. Based on the number of dents in the tray, it was evident it had been mainly used for construction rather than gardening or landscaping. It had that feel to it, the brute business of construction involving materials of brick and cement and shingles and gravel rather than the daintier materials of the garden, fertilizer and seed. The barrow was the property of our next door neighbor, an architect. We were part of a small group of neighbors who had taken on the task of removing an abandoned homeless encampment in our local park. The city had been unresponsive to pleas for help in the removal of the detritus abandoned by the homeless people. The city was also negligent in doing anything to curtail the crime festering in these encampments of despair. What was essentially a humanitarian crisis had become quietly normalized. The encampments took over parks and were riddled with rats, drug dealers and prostitution. Why should anyone be forced to live like that? Real estate was astronomical. But there were easy solutions. Seattle had over 500 vacant buildings available. Many were in disrepair, but with a little work they could be quite nice. There'd been multiple complaints — not just from our neighborhood, but neighborhoods all over the city, all ignored — and so certain citizens had chosen to try and deal with the problem themselves. It was my job to haul the abandoned belongings of the former occupant of the tent now lying flat on the grass to the top level of the park and deposit it next to the trash bins for pick up. All the belongings had been crammed into black plastic bags. I stacked as many as I could in the wheelbarrow and pushed the creaky old thing up the switchback trail to the top, empty it, and go back for more. The tent had been set up in a small open space surrounded by huge rhododendrons and a few cherry trees. I only

got a brief glimpse of the person who'd been living there. She was a middle-aged woman with a thin, scruffy male companion. The needles and used syringes that littered the ground where the tent stood were so thickly layered the grass was hidden beneath them. No one knew what their story was or where they had gone. The only thing that felt certain was the wheelbarrow and the creak of the wheel as I pushed its cargo to the summit of the park.

