

Scattering like light

by Matt Lubich

Denny squinted into the setting sun as clouds of steam billowed from behind his scarf, and out into the afternoon air. Soon, he would be back in the warmth of The Shelter, with a plate of stew, and enough change, stolen from the red kettle, for a pack of smokes.

The sunlight hurt Denny's eyes. He had been out of the County Detoxification Ward for two days now, and his temples throbbed with the clash of thoughts that sobriety released.

He had long since quit listening to the incessant clanging of the bell. He stood, ringing the bell, squinting into the setting sun, nauseous from the car exhaust, his body aching for alcohol.

Chaplain Paul had said he would be by at five to pick Denny up. Denny wished he had a watch so he'd know how much longer he would have to endure the bitter cold, and constant din of the bell. He also wished he had a watch so he could go across the street, to the pawn shop, and sell it for enough money for a bottle.

It was good for people like Denny to help with the charity collections Chaplain Paul said, since it would be people like Denny who would benefit from the money. This made Denny feel a little better about stealing change from the red kettle. It was like an advance. He was just getting rid of the middle man.

Denny licked his lips and tried to remember what alcohol tasted like as an icy gust of wind caught the steam of his breath: rising and dissipating, and then fading into the grey-white sky.

Chaplain Paul pulled up to the curb in the Jesus Jeep. He used the jeep to pick up the collection of winos and drug addicts that The Shelter had spread out on street corners across the city. Denny hated the Jesus Jeep. He hated the stifling heat, and the smell of unwashed bodies that hung in the air like the crucifix that dangled from the rear-view mirror. But mostly, he hated the "True Bible Story" cassette tapes that Chaplain Paul played constantly while they were riding to yet another day, on yet another street corner.

``Praise Jesus, Brother Denny," Chaplain Paul said as he rolled down the Jesus Jeep window. ``How goes the Lord's work?"

``I think I've got frostbite," Denny replied, making sure he continued to ring the bell so as to make it harder for Chaplain Paul to hear him. ``Is it five o'clock yet?"

``When Jesus lived among the lepers, he asked not when dinner would be ready, nor how long his trials would continue," Chaplain Paul admonished. ``I'm going to be late picking you up. I have to go to the hardware store. Vandals knocked over the Virgin Mary statue in front of The Shelter again. We're going to have to bolt her feet to the sidewalk."

With that, Chaplain Paul pulled away from the curb, leaving Denny alone again, the tape about the little boy who dreamed of Jesus one night, only to awaken with a palm-print burnt into his forehead, ringing in his ears.

Denny shifted his weight, and what little conscience he had left, from one foot to the other, trying to decide if he should just scoop the change out of the red kettle and go to the liquor store. Just about the time he decided to turn his back on sobriety, Denny's brother, Kenny, dropped a quarter into the kettle.

Kenny kept walking. Denny recognized Kenny, and Kenny recognized Denny, but the two brothers hadn't spoken since 1955. Occasionally, the two would see each other around town, but time and destiny had made them complete strangers.

That's what Kenny had told Denny in 1955 when he handed him the check for \$2,789.36: his half of their parents estate.

``Time and destiny has made us complete strangers," Kenny had said as he kicked clods of dirt onto the identical coffins, laying in the common grave. ``I only put up with you because Mom and Dad made me. They're dead now, so get lost, okay?"

Kenny had taken his part of the money, started a mail-order gun dealership, married his high school sweetheart, and begun breeding pit bulls.

Denny had drunk his part, pint by pint.

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A sound, like a thousand mariachi bands, filled Denny's head as he watched his brother continue walking down the street. He just knew Kenny had cheated him on their parents money, and for the first time in years, Denny felt something, anger. He reached down into the red kettle and removed a quarter. Kenny owed him that much.

When would Chaplain Paul be back? It just had to be after five o'clock Denny thought to himself as he stood ringing the bell, hating Kenny. The hate made him feel warm, and for a moment, Denny forgot where he was, and who he was. A blast of wind swirled around his head, bringing him back to reality, and Denny continued to wait for Chaplain Paul.

Traffic had gotten heavier on the street where Denny stood ringing his bell. A car pulled up to the curb. The man sniffed the air like a baboon coming upon a bunch of rotting mangoes as he walked past Denny into the building. He had left the car idling at the curb. For a moment, Denny thought about stealing it, his mind reeling at how many pints a stolen Buick would buy. Finally, he contented himself to listening to the radio, which the man had also left on.

It was tuned to one of those phone-in talk shows. The orderlies at the County Detoxification Ward listened to it sometimes, so Denny knew it was a phone-in shrink program.

The psychologist was talking to a woman. Even from the curb, with all the noise of the passing traffic, and the incessant clanging of the bell, Denny could hear the pain in her voice.

``Someone has to pay. There's so much pain in the world, so much ugliness, someone has to take responsibility for it."

``I stand here, looking at all the unhappiness, all the evil, and I think I'm the only one who sees it. Someone has to pay."

Denny rang his bell. He had been on this street corner, or one like it, all his life it seemed. Now all he could think of was the warmth of The Shelter. He glanced across the street, to the phone booth where a woman stood. He watched her put the gun to her head, and watched the blood splatter against the glass, scattering like a light

rain on the sidewalk, as the radio erupted in static. For a moment, Denny stopped ringing the bell, then began again.

