

TO THE DOGS

by

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There was a time when I, a surgeon to the lifted and tucked, spent the greater part of my day contemplating bums. I observed their seedy figures and the smoke from their morning cook fires as I cruised past the park on my way to work, spied on their noon time bench naps from behind the blue velvet drapes of my fifth floor operating room, studied their late afternoon actions and reactions and inaction from the parking lot after catering to the day's spate of rich and spoiled, often expending hours on end.

You're a lazy bum yourself!, hollered my ex-wife via text message when her alimony check arrived late, a declaration that while prophetic was hardly generous to me (or the bums, for that matter) and not exactly accurate, not considering that I was, after all, still a producing plastic surgeon...*who is going to the dogs!!!*, the hysterical punctuation of which now causes pause and suggests at least the possibility that Rita's pronouncement may have been more of a curse than a thoughtful analysis of human character.

Because not long thereafter, I became a bum.

My interest in the downtrodden was kindled purely by happenstance after my sweet and then still-legal mate, bless her, crated away all our furniture one day and ran off to craggy mommy wailing about spousal abandonment and marital infidelity, charges that were clearly exaggerated if not patently false. For one thing, Rita and I were already rich with every luxury imaginable, so whether or not I continued to generate a flow of income was irrelevant to the question of material support. For another, I'd come to have no interest in sex whatsoever, and so how unfaithful could I be?

I mean, here I thought we were happily married. I slept so much only because I was over-worked and under-medicated, and my loss of appetite was, in truth, a godsend to a set of coronary arteries so clogged by Helga's high-sludge power meals. (Ah, sweet Helga—our twenty-

seven year old Swedish live-in who couldn't clean to save her life, although boy, could she ever...um, actually, never mind.)

Anyway, my initial encounter with the bums was accidental or at least as accidental as any meaningful first encounter ever is. I was on my way back to my palatial office after a morning of hectic hospital surgery (hectic because I'd arrived late, late because I'd overslept, overslept because I'd spent half the night feeling sorry for myself, feeling sorry for myself because I'd grown bored of turning old faces into new).

With only a half hour before the start of my afternoon schedule, I zipped through a McDonalds drive-thru, pulled into the closest parking lot, and, so as not to spill food on my Italian calf-leather upholstery, walked over to a vacant wood bench and sat down.

There they were, a group fifty yards away, clowning around in front of a dilapidated old brick wall, having fun and wasting time. The attraction was immediate.

I watched them as I devoured my burger, melted cheese dripping freely onto my Versace wool pants, amazed that I couldn't recall having noticed anyone there before. I must have observed them this way for over an hour before my pager summoned me back to an office full of nervous staff and anxious patients.

That evening I carried my Quarter Pounder and chocolate shake back to the same bench and chewed slowly and deliberately, trying hard not to appear conspicuous behind my opened *L.A. Times*. I observed the bums until it was too dark to see, sucking on my plastic straw long after the cup ran dry. Once I got home, it was hard to think of anything else but them, and I fell asleep still fully dressed.

The next morning I awoke to a newspaper headline entitled 'The Vagrants of Friendship Park'. Apprehensive that something bad had happened, I jumped into the text only to discover that the article was Part Four of an on-going human interest series featuring the homeless in and around the city of Santa Monica. The text dwelled on the usual explanations for adopting that lifestyle (poor education, minimum wage employment, liquor and hard drugs, welfare reform, mental illness—all of which, I can now say with some authority, have little to do with it).

What intrigued me most about the article were its photos that revealed not only the park

encampment in more detail than I'd been able to discern from my bench but also several black-and-white photos of a bum called Dave ('not his real name'). A Vietnam vet and former C.P.A., Dave had resided (that is, slept) inside of a cardboard refrigerator box reinforced with tin foil and duct tape in Friendship Park for the past eighteen months.

What I found so mesmerizing about the man had nothing to do with the article's sob story (likely sanitized and dramatized for print) or Dave's dark and stubbly face, sun-damaged with poorly-sutured scars. No, what grabbed me was the intensity of his expression. His gray eyes, I presumed, must be light blue in real life (although I can now attest that they're the same drab green color of a worn dollar bill, identical to mine). His chin was held high and his gaze directed at the camera, an expression suggesting an Apollonian nobility without embarrassment, confusion, or fear.

I studied Dave's picture and especially his eyes that seemed to be staring right back into mine. The longer I looked at him, the lighter grew his eyes, becoming not just brighter but an otherworldly shade of white, as shiny as poached albumin. Then suddenly, his left eye turned black and he winked at me.

From then on were we linked, as if a strong force was pulling us together.

Of course, I now understand that what I actually recognized at that moment was one of life's basic truths: that somewhere inside of every plastic surgeon lives a bum while inside of every bum lives a plastic surgeon—or something to that effect. I can't say for exactly how long I sat at the kitchen table with my eyes so affixed, but I do recall vaguely being late again for work.

By week's end, I was consuming all of my meals in Friendship Park and thereafter became such a regular beneath the golden arches that the cashier came to have my food pre-bagged and waiting—Egg McMuffin at 7:30, Chicken McNuggets at twelve noon, Big Mac Combo at six sharp, super-sized, iced tea with lemon.

It was the bums' detachment, I think, that charmed me over, their indifference to the frantic pace of life around them, to all the mating rituals and soccer practices and drug transactions occurring within their midst, to the grid-locked streets and high-rise concrete bunkers surrounding their tiny slice of Eden, as if they were conserving energy for some upcoming final

struggle or perhaps attempting reverse-entropy. Something about their ability to improvise and their simple self-sufficiency made me feel...well, inadequate.

Not that their lives were trouble-free, not with all the tourists pointing and the police harassing, not between the roving night gangs and the unexpected early morning lawn sprinklers. I think it was their unique brand of camaraderie that most appealed to me, their brotherhood of secret rites and oaths suggesting another approach to living life.

Whatever the nature of the pull, my fascination grew to *idée fixe*. I began to worry constantly about the bums, about their safety and inhumane living conditions and the hardships they endured, about whether they were happy or lonely, about my chance discovery that to the British the word 'bum' was slang for buttocks.

I canceled a full morning of surgery so I could watch them even longer, then told my office manager I felt sick and left early that afternoon.

I began to abandon my meals barely-eaten on the park bench in case the idlers might be hungry and left behind canned goods and old clothes and plastic tarps and even small amounts of cash. I contemplated approaching them to ask if they needed any doctoring but never did because...well, for one thing, they still scared me half to death. I worried whether they viewed me as just another nuisance, if they would rather I let them be, if maybe I should cut this out.

That's when I first caught sight of Dave. It was him, all right. I recognized him from the newspaper and recalled his sad story. He was playing with his dog, a coyote-thin retriever as yellow as a Hostess Twinkie. Something about bum and pet charmed me, the way as a couple they seemed oblivious to their predicaments, and I yearned to experience the same. I'd gradually come to feel as if I were no longer leading my own real life, as if my mind had become trapped inside the wrong body.

It began to rain but I didn't budge. Dave took cover inside his cardboard box while the dog crouched close by in the dirt. While the storm passed over quickly, I still ended up getting soaked.

After that, the bums seemed to regard me differently, studying me with the same sort of fascination I had when studying them, like two people sizing up each other on a first date.

Eventually they even came to welcome my gaze, sometimes to the point of strutting around or showing off. Though there were still no attempts at direct communication, I could tell that a bond had been forged, deadbeat to bench warmer. I came to perceive their existence not as a step backwards but as a form of social evolution, a progressive new way of coping.

One day Dave's mongrel ran up to me and grabbed my hot dog right out of my hand.

That night I couldn't sleep and thus found myself wide awake when the phone rang at 2 AM. It was the St. Vincent's Hospital emergency room nurse calling about a patient who'd been accosted. One of the man's upper eyelids had been lacerated into several pieces. The notion came to me to make up an excuse—dead car battery, got the flu, relative landing at LAX—but I'd already employed that approach with Nurse Betty three times in two weeks.

I reluctantly responded, and on my way to the hospital drove by the darkened park. I thought about checking out the sleeping bums but then grew ashamed of my Peeping Tom obsession, embarrassed about how I'd begun spying on them like they were freaks. It was time to call it quits, I decided, time to leave these people behind me and get on with real life.

The emergency room at night is a human zoo where the animals never sleep and their keepers are always short-handed and edgy. I walked into the patient's curtained cubicle, anxious to get the task at hand over with and myself back in bed. Lying on a gurney was a body reeking of sewer gas, according to the chart an uninsured transient. An ophthalmologist had already examined the man's eye and pronounced it intact, and the nurses had scrubbed his face with Betadyne, draped his wounds, and opened an instrument tray. I adjusted the lights just so, slipped on my surgical magnifying glasses, and donned sterile gloves.

All I could see of the fellow was his shredded right upper eyelid. I ordered him to hold still, injected the anesthetic, and then carefully probed his wounds. After removing a shard of brown glass (beer bottle), I started in on the reconstruction, my hands moving by habit, my mind half asleep. Once I'd pieced him back together enough to allow his lids to move, I removed the drape and asked him to open up so I could evaluate the adequacy of my repair.

Unexpectedly, the lights in the ER went off, dead black, but then came back on again as the emergency power generators must have engaged. I noticed I felt different, not so confident,

slightly afraid. I again ordered the bum to open his eyes, but found myself holding my breath as I waited, fingers trembling, my chest thumping like CPR from the inside out. His lids quivered and strained and then snapped wide apart.

Of course it was Dave, his green eyes just as shiny as two pickle slices floating in brine. His irises began to swirl and like a whirlpool sucked my gaze right in through his pupils. I felt enfolded and winded, like a drowning man getting dragged down for the final time. The surgical light grew more and more intense, as if its bulbs might explode. Not only could I make out my reflection on Dave's glistening corneas but I felt my gaze penetrating through them, down to his retinas and into his brain, just as he must have been able to visualize himself inside of me.

And then it happened. Our breathing synchronized, our heartbeats grew concordant, and the change came as suddenly as an orgiastic flow. My universe exploded with a private Big Bang, like a genie escaping from his lamp and entering into a new sphere of being. And in that way, the two of us became one, though only for a moment before it was again back to two.

Dizzy and frightened, I squeezed my eyes together only to hear a familiar voice (my own?) order me to open them up. When I did (but boy, was it difficult), I was astonished to see Dave staring back at me through a pair of high-tech surgical loupes just like mine. But my eyelids felt heavy and must have again closed on their own. I felt him touching my face (oh, were my eyes ever burning) but then either fell asleep or probably fainted.

The next thing I remember was Nurse Betty helping me down from the gurney. Confused more than scared, I scanned the room. A surgeon was standing in the corner, scribbling notes into the chart. He stopped, looked over at me, and I recognized...*my face*. Astounded, I tried to say something, but my mouth felt like it was stuffed full of cotton, and he got up and walked away. Nurse Betty didn't seem to recognize me, either, and instead escorted me out to the waiting room where she released me to the custody of two smelly men I didn't know.

Outside, it was still dark. A vagabond at each arm, I staggered across the parking lot. From out of nowhere a pair of headlights approached at high speed, and we barely had time to dodge a sports car, though not before I recognized the driver, that *very* same surgeon but now at the wheel of *my red killer coupe*! One tramp yelled out something about 'watch out you snoopy bastard!'

and then the three of us teetered off to Friendship Park and their private resort beneath the oaks.

Thus, I became a bum (although I am not one any longer). Safe at the commune, I assumed ownership of Dave's box, his dog, his wardrobe of second-hand sweats, Hawaiian shirts, and rubber flip-flops (only one pair of work pants, zipper stuck), and, most notably, his vagabond frame of reference, although not yet completely. I still thought of myself as a physician and so doctored to my cohorts, removing their splinters, lancing their boils and, of course, instructing them on how to properly remove my eyelid stitches.

A few days later I was detained by a park maintenance man when I stopped a lady jogger to ask if I could borrow her cell phone to call for help. I explained to the park man about what had happened to me and assured him that I was, believe it or not, an abducted plastic surgeon, an MIA. All he did, though, was haul me back to Box City.

Within days, I sensed myself embracing the transformation, and this scared me no end. Whose blood was coursing through my veins? Whose air was I exhaling? How had my lily white surgeon's hands turned so calloused and scabbed? Whose stubby fingers were now wiggling from the ends of them, nails filthy, cuticles frayed? When did I develop so much dandruff? Why did my cologne smell like B.O.?

Plus, I was worried half to death about poor Dave. If I'd turned into him, then by reciprocity had he become me? Or, was I still both he *and* me, and if so, well then—Jeez!, what the hell happened to that poor old accountant so down on his luck? Broken hearts, I knew, could mend, but what became of split personalities?

The burger-eating voyeur continued his pilgrimages to our park and for a while I sensed a mental link with him. But as our memory chains went on enlarging and grew more dissimilar by the day, I perceived the bond weakening. The same seemed to be happening with him, as if his preoccupation had been transfigured into an actual real-life bum, an obsession-turned-object that gradually lost its pull as a ruling passion.

For whatever reason, his visits grew less frequent until one day they ceased. I continued to see him occasionally driving past the park in *my* red fat muscle car, but he spent less and less time watching us and finally no time at all.

My interest in playing M*A*S*H faded until I no longer doctored to anybody, including myself. I learned to let go and experienced immense satisfaction in newfound and engaging pastimes like tossing horseshoes dawn to dusk, staring at passersby through a found pair of 3-D glasses, bathing in public restrooms—fulfilling diversions that had escaped me in former days.

Think what you will, but what happened to me was hardly extraordinary. If cats can have nine lives, why can't humans? I came to view the incident as less a case of body snatching and more a flowering of human potential, a painful extraction from a latent inventory of possible selves, not just a metamorphosis or mere awakening but an expansion of the dormant trapped inside my soul—partly a karmic cycle of birth-misery-death-rebirth, partly a mitosis resulting in real personal growth, like a brand new and distinct reflection generated off an unaltered multifaceted gem.

Poetic twaddle from a born-again psycho? All I can say for sure is that the capacity to develop more capacity requires good timing, proper circumstances, an open mind set, and plenty of luck.

Bumming, I discovered, had its good points (as had being a plastic surgeon), but eventually even the Gypsy routine came to feel tedious and repetitive. I found myself devoting less time to personal hygiene, home maintenance (pigeon droppings, red ants, water damage), and interpersonal bum relationships, and more time to playing fetch with my dog. I came to admire his energetic nature, his unwavering loyalty, and his oblivion to matted hair, open sores, fleas and ticks, and the ever present threat of rabies.

We began to take longer and longer walks together looking for cigarette butts and lost nickels, searching through dumpsters for usable toiletries and paperback mysteries not missing many pages, chasing our cracked Frisbee for hours, dodging stones and beer cans thrown by teenagers, sharing whatever food we could scavenge. I marveled at how my dog always seemed contented and eager to please, even when cold and hungry. I wondered about what thoughts passed through his mind, if he worried about practical concerns, whether he dreamed, and what it might be like to experience life from his point of view. I drew the line only at letting him sleep inside my newly discovered treasure, a two man tent with only three major tears.

One day as I was napping, I felt something wet rub against the skin of my still healing wounds. I sat up and opened my eyes. My dog was whimpering, one bloody paw held up as if offered for a handshake, the other half-crushed. I washed them both and then fed him two Ritz crackers. Though he could barely stand and seemed to be in pain, he hobbled off to the lawn and sat down next to his rubber ball.

That night it rained. Curled up inside the warmth and safety of my tent but worrying about what the water was doing to my dog, I noticed the smell of wet fur. There he was, standing at the entrance, even though he knew my tent was off-limits. I could tell from the longing in his salami brown eyes that he badly wanted to come inside. I invited him in briefly, dried him off with my tee shirt, then told him to scat. He refused to move off my jute Welcome mat and was too heavy for me to push. I started to scold him, but then he looked up to me, tilted his head just so, and focused on me with great intensity.

How could I not feel ashamed of myself? I recognized in our interaction not just the humanity of his craving but the dogginess of my territoriality. How had I again allowed myself to grow so self-centered?

And so I opened my heart and let the feeling take hold of me, a tender panic I'd experienced only one time before. Once the rapture passed, I sensed somatically that my consciousness had evolved to a yet higher plane.

And, of course, that Man's Best Friend was now firmly entrenched inside my humble abode.

Time has passed and the living is good again, although I concede that in this god-eat-god world life's direction can feel strange. That's why I've made it my policy to focus on the good and ignore all the rest, to keep my outlook optimistic and the morale of those around me high. I cherish my scraps of leftovers and stand ready to welcome strays into the fold, regardless of overcrowding. I find solace in the knowledge that should I ever be accosted and hauled off to a busy veterinarian, at least I will be able to judge whether I am receiving first-class care.

The Hibachi has been lit, the air smells luscious, and I can feel the drool building. In the distance, I spy a gray squirrel collecting acorns. I study his diligence and then catch myself

wondering how it might feel to be so cute and frisky, to have such a tiny body attached to such a bushy tail, to—

He stops what he's doing, sits tall, and stares at me. His eyes look like big Hershey's Kisses, and I swear I can taste the sweetness of his gaze. But I break the connection and force myself to look away. For the time being, at least, I've had enough.

Settled in on the soft grass beside my former tent, I lower my chin onto two paws well-healed, lick the tip of my nose with my tongue, and wait patiently for my master to toss me a bone.