

*Caution: stronger language than you hear me speak or seen me write*

John will admit that he volunteered to work at the homeless shelter to get laid. It was probably not what you are thinking. He thought homeless shelters would be staffed with young outwardly thinking pretty women. A sort of “getting good by doing good” philosophy. So at the organizational meeting, when he sat next such a girl with no ring on her finger, he eagerly raised his hand when the speaker said they needed a Wednesday night supervisor. Then speaker was stunned saying, “You must be single?” since John proffered time without having to consult his spouse. John smiled as he said “Yes” because he thought that it would help his mission to strike up a conversation with the pretty girl. But she was in the wrong room of the community center. She had come for the Airhead Feminist Wannabees Against Anything Really Icky (don’t bother, there is no acronym.) It was too late when John realized that the shelter was staffed by middle-aged church going people.

John’s sense of commitment is strong. If he had manipulated things so the pretty girl would sleep with him it would have been part of a long, meaningful and hopefully everlasting relationship. This strong sense of commitment meant that he stood by his word to be the Wednesday night supervisor. He just did not know what the Wednesday night supervisor did.

But each Wednesday night since November, John would show up at the old city post office about 8 PM to unlock it and let in the line of homeless. The city allowed the shelter to use the old post office, which sat isolated in an urban prairie of nothing. The last gasps of urban renewal knocked down most of the buildings in the surrounding blocks and then somebody forgot they were supposed to rebuild. Even so, there was severe political objection – that a shelter would encourage homeless and ruin the neighborhood. (What neighborhood?) So John and the volunteers had to stick by strict rules or they would be shut down. The most important was no more than nineteen people.

This very cold day in March threatened zero degree weather with wind chill. So the guys were huddled underneath the meager portico over the post office entrance. They cheered when they saw John. “Cold one, huh?” John asked. “Bet your ass,” they responded.

The men came in one by one. Most knew the routine and were on first name basis with most of the volunteers. The shelter by default became a men’s shelter and the shelter of choice. They were fed, given the chance to get new clothes and given a warm place to sleep on a cot with fresh sheets. The shelter did not ask a lot of questions, unlike the county shelter at the airport. Women were rare in the shelter because the government programs seemed find them apartments or give them hotel rooms. But these men did not qualify for or want any such assistance. They had fallen through all the other tears in the social safety net. They were the “undeserving poor” as describe by Alfred Dolittle in **Pygmalion (My Fair Lady** without the music.)

First on line was Washington. He was back. No one had seen him for a few weeks. Like most of the guys, he had a substance abuse problem. The shelter rule about in by 10 PM forced the men to come out of the bars early which was a good first step. Other guys would cynically brag how they were going to get into the 13-week rehab program by Christmas so they could spend the coldest days in comfort. Then they would come out and celebrate with their other homeless buddies in the city taverns. Washington was not like that. He was getting drier as the calendar passed New Years. Someone at the organization got him a job and an apartment. But the day before both were to start, Washington disappeared on a binge. The shelter people guessed it was some sort of fear of success. At least he was alive and back. They would try again.

As they entered the men were supposed to sign in their name and write down their birthday. That was all. Ronald signed in and took his usual place in the corner where empty tables stood waiting for food. Standing erect in the corner with his long black coat, an impeccably white shirt, gray suit, gold tie and his brief cased on his side, he looked like a stockbroker waiting for a commuter train. Ronald would be silent until bedtime, often not eating any food. Some said he was a school principal that went through a messy divorce and went bonkers. Others said he was a pretender. Tonight he held up a magazine photo of a luxurious house. Later when the frenzy of activity would die down, John would ask him about the photo. Ronald replied in a deep but quiet voice, "It is a picture to show you that while I am grateful for what you are doing, I ultimately want more out of life."

That was not an unusual attitude in the shelter. All the clients felt they were better than this. There were caddies who looked down on the others as lazy drunks. The caddies were the last remnants of the respectable hobos, the migrant train-jumping workers of decades earlier. Like migratory birds, the caddies would work the summer in northern states and in the dead of winter go south. They were back now that it was March because the golfers were out. The caddies would leave the shelter at 5 AM to walk to their work.

Then there were the guys who John only saw once or twice. They truly used the shelter as a temporary place until they found work or an apartment. You didn't get to know them because they were gone so soon. But they would know they were too good to "live" in the shelter.

Of course there were the ones who didn't think the rules applied to them. Whether it was where to place the cot or when to take showers, they were better than this place, so the rules shouldn't apply to them. John didn't want to be a dictator but thought the rules were worth enforcing for the sake of the group and some of the clients. Robert for example was a small older gentleman and very quiet. If there was a free-for-all for cots, or new socks, Robert would get nothing – he was not very pushy. John kept an eye open for him and kept order so Robert would get his share. These days Robert was sporting a big red bruise on his cheek. John knew it was useless to ask how it happened.

There were a couple of other volunteers who came in including a new one who seemed frightened by the scene. John had them put out the paper cups and juice so the guys

could get a drink. Unfortunately, still none of the volunteers were attractive young women. John understood, it would be too scary for them here. The loss of a Wednesday night (and the following Thursday because he would be exhausted after a full days work) was detrimental to John's social life. John worked in a brokerage firm as an IT person, running the computers for the traders. Whatever available women he met at work were not going to be impressed by him. The brokers made all the money and the clients had all the money. John thought his meager salary would be impressive to young women working as a volunteer in a homeless shelter. There his competition was not brokers but a clientele that was not financially competitive.

Franklin saluted a hello to John as he walked passed the juice to the racks of clothes. Franklin, John always thought, was a good-looking guy that probably impressed all the ladies. And he talked about being close to a deal so he could get out of the shelter. Franklin was trying to get Stevie Wonder to record some of his songs. It took a few weeks before John realized that was all a fantasy. Franklin too thought he was better than this place and wanted to people to know that he was very close to getting out and succeeding. Some might call it delusion; others might call it hope. A few of the clothes hung on some pipe racks along the wall of the long room that was once the post office lobby. An improvised sheetrock wall was placed in front of the windows and mailboxes. Behind them was a vault of clothes. If you want to choke a new charity ask for clothes. People have dressers and closets full of them and are happy to unload them. The organization stopped asking for clothes in December.

There was squabbling and hissing come from the far end of the hall. John went over. Liam and Joachim were fighting and calling each other "nigger faggots." John yelled "Stop!" and they listened. "What's going on?" he asked quietly.

"He took my spot, I always place my cot here." Joachim pointed to the corner and adjusted the brightly colored tie he wore as a headband. He was always preening and John had a hard time not laughing.

"This is not the Hilton; we don't take reservations." Fight over. Interestingly in the years John would end up working at the shelter the only time he heard the word "faggot" or "nigger" used in anger was when these two black homosexuals got close to each other. Even with the multiplicity of races and orientations, the other clients never crossed the line on those words. Joachim hissed and flitted. He was a walking cliché.

Liam, whose appearance would not immediately speak of his sexual preference, but his voice would, said comely to John, "I missed you at Stutz the other night." It was the closest gay bar to the shelter.

"I'm not that kind of guy, Liam."

"I know, but I can dream."

The church group arrived with the food. Another volunteer let them in and the trays of ziti were placed on the old folding tables. John greeted them and asked “which church?” Zion Baptist they proclaimed. John was impressed – another church in his neighborhood he knew nothing about. The organization was made up of different denominations of Christian churches, synagogues and a humanist ethical society that believed in order without a God. Each one took a night to cook or perform some other service.

Bernie was the first in line. “Italian food again?” John noticed how the expectations of the clientele changed as the year went on. In December when the cold weather really set in everyone was grateful for the shelter and the food. But since the cold weather peaked in February the complaints increased. What they appreciated in December was the “same ol’, same ol’” in March.

The call to help the homeless reaches its climax for most people at the holiday season, but once the Christmas lights come down, most forget. John heard the guys talk about the good meals at shelters from Thanksgiving to Christmas. After that, they grumbled no once cared. In nearby New York City, there was a guidebook rating the shelters listing their hours of operation, how good the food was, if you have to answer any questions and if you have to listen to a sermon. We were a three-star shelter.

“Why is it always Italian food!” Bernie bellowed. John cringed because Bernie was the kind of guy to get fights going over anything. He had that long lanky look with an Adam’s apple as big as his nose that would have made him the butt of jokes wherever he might have ended up – the army, a fraternity, or a sports team. Bernie, according to the other guys, had an apartment. He would go there each day after sleeping in the shelter. Bernie was under the impression that a guy named “Rupert Rupert” was after him. His paranoia had him sleeping in the shelter. Was he on drugs or off his medication? It did not seem to matter.

It was a sore point for some of the guys because the shelter, by law, was limited to 19 clients. They would feed about thirty but the overflow would be picked up by county van at 11 PM to be taken to their shelter. The guys felt Bernie was taking the cot that a needy friend could use. Yet, some of the guys would visit their girlfriends during the day at the hotel and come to the shelter at night. So they were no different from Bernie in that respect. John noted that half the guys had a more active social life than he did.

One night, Greg sat up and told John all about his woman. He said he only did her a few times but mostly they had just an arrangement to get public assistance. She had an apartment and if she would answer the phone and say he was her man, she could get apartment money “on account her man is so bad.” He would tell the county he could not work because he could not remember things. They would give him public assistance and set him up for counseling. He would miss the sessions and they would complain. He would say that he has trouble remembering things. They noticed that he always remembered the days he had to wait in line to get his checks. Greg’s life sounded exhausting to John who figured it was just easier to have a job. And while John did not

approved of how a life like that was built on dishonesty, he had to admit that it took special survival skills – like the mountain men of the 18<sup>th</sup> century American west.

On any given night there would be 19 men staying at the shelter and John learned there would be 19 stories. Man of the guys were mildly deranged either through substance abuse or being on the street. John could not figure out if being on the street drove them to craziness or craziness drove them to the streets. It was probably a mixture of both.

Others simply had burned all their bridges. One guy complained that his sister kicked him out. He had lost his job and apartment and girlfriend. His sister with small kids took him in to help him get back on his feet. But he used the opportunity to go out drinking and come home late and vomit on her sofa. He thought his sister was being unreasonable.

Another guy seemed sane and strong and was working. But he didn't have a place to live because he didn't want a paper trail. His ex-wife was always hauling him into court for money. He would work steady for cash, but the moment she got word of it, he was in court. He designed his life – day labor and sleeping in shelters – as a means to avoid giving her any money.

Another guy had no visible signs of derangement, addiction or unemployability. He was just dwarfish and hung like a horse. John got the impression that he was just too busy having sex with curious women to bother with work or getting a job. Another client who had a better social life than John.

The men were fed and settling into their cots. Dinner was cleaned up. It was just before 11 PM when another guy walked into the shelter. He was agitated like he was strung out on crack or bad whiskey. He began to settle in to sleep on the old couch by the food tables. John went over to him. "Excuse me, Sir, what are you doing." He turned over and smiled at John. "It's okay, they let me sleep on the couch."

"No they don't. I have been here every Wednesday and I haven't seen you before. I need you to sign in and then you can take the van to the county shelter."

"No, It's no problem. They let me sleep on the couch last night. You don't run this place. Now let me sleep."

"I do run this place on Wednesdays. Whatever they did last night was last night, but on my nights you cannot do this. We can give you shelter for a while but you have to get on the van when it comes" Over the last few months, John had crafted an atmosphere of compliance by gently asking the guys. He had occasionally been forceful and even called the police once, so the clients knew he meant business. He didn't want one person to flaunt the rules and destroy the delicate order that he established. He also didn't want a watchdog group to come in and see the 20<sup>th</sup> guy on the sofa. That would shut down the shelter for everyone.

The guy on the couch had tried friendliness and denial and was now trying bargaining. “Look, I stay on the couch and I’ll help out in the morning. I am not like the drunk bastards you got here.”

John repeated his last sentence carefully with no anger or emotion. “We can give you shelter but you have to get on the van when it comes”

“I don’t HAVE to do anything!” Bargaining did not work; he was trying anger.

“Right. You don’t have to get on the van. But you are leaving at 11 o’clock. Either on that van or in the street. Its your choice.” Just then the newest volunteer stepped up to help; at least John thought so.

“He has rights, you can’t make him go.”

John spoke to the volunteer for the benefit of the couch-guy who was sitting up and taking notice. “He has no right to stay here. What we have is an agreement. The guys get food and some shelter for obeying our rules. They don’t obey; they are out. It is their choice.” The volunteered backed down. John stared again at couch-guy.

Meanwhile the van arrived just outside the old post office door. All the men who were to go had lined up (as John had instructed them in the previous weeks) but none of them wanted to miss the show. The couch-guy stood up. He was bigger than John. “I ain’t going no where!”

John repeated his directive looking up to his face “You are out that door, now. Either get on the van or on the street. If I have to, I will call the Police.”

The guy formerly of the couch waved his arms. “It’s cold out there. If I go out on that street and die – it will be on your head!”

“No it won’t. I won’t care.” The new volunteered gasped. John was being grimly truthfully. “I gave you a choice. You choose the street, then it’s your responsibility.”

Formerly-couch-guy tried one last coercion, which obviously worked before on others “You think you are a liberal but you are not!”

“Don’t call me a liberal!” John yelled “Because that’s like calling me a mother-fucker and I don’t take that shit from anyone!” John’s calculated outburst was a surprise to all the guys who never heard him curse before. Perhaps convinced by John’s anger or the sheer lunacy of John’s argument, formerly-couch-guy got onto the van. There was mild applause from the men of the shelter but the new volunteer was still aghast at what he saw. Somehow, a political conservative had gotten into their shelter!

John had occasionally been at odds with some of the homeless advocates in the organization. They seemed more interested in preserving the right of the men to be

homeless rather than help them not be homeless. John thought if the men wanted to change their situation they should get dry, get some psychological help and get jobs. It was very bourgeois of John, he knew. He recalled a conversation with Roosevelt about how this shelter was not a lifestyle. "We are not here to judge. We are here to make sure that tonight you are fed and warm. The rest is up to you."

About midnight most of the guys were asleep. John was reclining in a folding chair with his legs propped up on another. (John would not sleep on the couch because it smelled.) Franklin was up and washing something off his clothes near the showers and bathroom, where the light was. John could tell Franklin was agitated and it would be a long night sitting up and talking with him. One night they discussed art in the Napoleonic era. Franklin spent his days in the city library like some of the other guys. Only Franklin read books. He would bring newfound knowledge to John to talk about things. John wondered what the topic would be this night.

"I am working on a new translation of the Bible" Franklin started as he sat next to John. Franklin went onto describe how he had encountered an alien from space names Ashtar who was asking him to bring the word of God to Americans. This was the most delusional conversation yet with Franklin. John figured the long winter season was getting him. It was harder for Franklin to keep up his appearance. Whereas in the November he looked like he was ready for a night out with the ladies, now he looked more haggard and distressed. "Americans, Ashtar told me, were the best people picked from the whole world. They were motivated and strong. They came here and they were the ones to take Humans into space. Space was where we would find all the answers and God." John was mesmerized by Franklin's intensity and was ready to be convinced that this was a true encounter...not just Franklin's psychosis. "When we get to space, though, only the pure of race will be saved. So I can't go. I told Ashtar that." John asked what Ashtar said to that. Franklin responded "He said, 'I grok you.'"

"Grok." It was a dead give away that Franklin concocted this encounter from the books in the library. It was a reference the Science Fiction book **Stranger in a Strangeland**. Heinlein's aliens use the word "Grok" to say that a co-mingling of intelligence between two creatures has occurred and that a level of understanding has been reached, they had become one.

"Try to get some sleep, Franklin." John patted him on the back as he led him to his cot. Helped him off with his boots and covered him with a blanket.

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John woke up from his sleep when the front door blew open. He got up and closed it, wondering how that happened. The deadbolt had been thrown open. He closed the door and locked the bolt. He rubbed his eyes and looked to see if anyone was up. It was almost three o'clock. No one was moving around but he saw that Franklin's cot was empty and all his stuff was gone. Who knows how long ago Franklin went out into the

cold to meet Ashtar. John got his coat. As all the other volunteers went home, John woke up Roosevelt and told him he was looking for Franklin.

In the city, the streetlights loomed overhead like aliens with a large orange eye. A fence and an abandoned car or trailer here and there dotted the open landscape. It took John about ten minutes to see the human figure lying on the ground three blocks from the post office. It was Franklin, his stubbly beard covered with frost.

John held the shivering Franklin in his arms. He was unconscious but breathing. He wanted to lift him up to get him walking back to the shelter. Two lights glared at John, so he could not make out the approaching vehicle, which hummed quietly until it was just 10 yards from them. The vehicle was not touching the ground.

Somebody got out. A door slammed closed. A voice came from behind the brilliant lights. "We're here." He stepped forward. He was a short round thing, in a shiny blue outfit with a dozen or so appendages emanating from a round center below a head with human like features – eyes mouth and ears, just a few extra of some. "I am Ashtar."

"Then Franklin isn't crazy." John said aloud.

"Oh, no he's nuts. Completely. But that doesn't mean he isn't well informed. Most of what he told you is true but the stuff about race and a new translation of the Bible are all his issues. We are not interested in your concept of race except for how you use it to treat others. And as for your Bible... we too are struggling with discovering and doing the work of God. So our Bible, your Bible, hey whatever helps get us there."

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"Who we are and where we are from is not important. Where our base is in this solar system is not important either." Oops. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned that. I guess I'll have to erase your memory. Just joking, we don't do that anymore. But really don't talk about that base or anything. Please."

"When he said you guys told him you 'grok' him I just assumed..." John was still trying to process everything.

"Well I've read **Stranger in the Strange Land** and knew Franklin did too. So, I figured it was the best way to reach him. I know a lot of us think your science fiction is schlock, but I think it's a great way to explore the human condition with allegory. I've read it all. Heinlein, Vonnegut, Bradbury, Wells, Vern. I love the stuff.

"We are particularly fascinated by the diversity of your social groups. This little shelter represents people of different faiths, philosophies, political viewpoints, and income and yet you all agree on the simple need to provide food and a warm place to sleep. On the other hand, we tracked your planet wide wars where the fight was over the tiniest of disparities: which of God's books is correct, how to organized your economy, whatever.

Franklin was right, though. The United States is the best experiment you Earthers, sorry, you Earthlings have going. At least I think so.

“We are much more uniform in our society and live by more rigid protocols. We comply. I think we are more like your Earth bees. So we don’t know the surge of good feeling that comes from altruism. Like I said, we just *comply*.”

As Ashtar spoke, a robot with as many tentacles rolled off the vehicle and approached John and Franklin. “We want to see what an altruistic orgasm feels like. We’d would like to have Franklin come with us and take care of him for a while. If that is okay with you.”

John stood still stunned as the robot’s arms gently nestled Franklin’s large body, cradled like a baby. “I am not in a position to give you that permission.” John said.

“But you would be the only one to miss him. We can feed him and talk with him and take him to places he only imagined and when he’s dry and better, if he wants we’ll bring him back.” John nodded approval.

Ashtar continued, “We like Franklin. He’s a gentle soul. And he will be delicious.

“Sorry! That’s just a joke. ‘To Serve Man’, I’ve seen all the Twilight Zones too. I loved that one. No really, we don’t eat humans, anymore. I mean it only happened once, on one of the first missions. Even then a crewman did it as a goof, on a dare. Really.”

The robot placed Franklin in the ship. Ashtar thanked John and gave him a phone number where he could leave a message if necessary. It might take months or years for him to get the message depending which star system he was in. But he would get the message. Ashtar stood before the door of the ship. “Live long and prosper” he said with about five different tentacles making something akin to the Vulcan salute. “I love that show too.”

The vehicle cruised out of the lot, signaled a left turn and took off for the sky where it seemed to merge with a larger spot of light high above the city.

*The descriptions of each homeless man are true as are the general workings of the shelter. Some names were changed because I couldn’t remember the real ones. The ending is a fabrication. Really.*