

The Street Dweller

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Steven J. Kelly was an educated man. Oh, his Georgetown education was completely informal. You might even say he had a folk education. He had received the equivalent of a PhD in living on the streets.

He didn't like being called a homeless person. Once a TV reporter, a leggy blond with two buttons opened on a silky blouse and smelling of rose water, asked him on camera, what it was like being homeless. His indignant reply was, "Hell lady, I have a home, it's just not a house." He never knew if his great moment of TV fame ever aired. He preferred to be referred to as a "street dweller."

Once he exerted considerable energy, his mind fueled by Richards Wild Irish Rose, in an attempt to figure out how long he had been on the street. He was 34 when his world collapsed. His modest job as an industrial supplies salesman ended when the company went belly up. After a few months it was painfully obvious that his state of depression and the foreclosure on the home was not a good environment for the children. His wife left him standing on the front steps, fighting back tears as the car pulled away from the curb, while a suit and brief case walk toward him, eviction papers in hand. That was thirty five years ago.

For a while he tried to stay in touch with the family by way of the pay phone at the Salvation Army flop house, but eventually the divorce was final. Cheryl met Hank Knox, from Alabama, through former mutual friends. When they married she packed up the kids and moved to Birmingham. All he knew of this had come to him by way of

former mutual friends who seemed to delight in her good fortune at the expense of his broken heart. All of that had hardened him. Being on the street hardened him. The alcohol had hardened him, and being alone among peers, in the middle of a world power city had hardened him.

Perhaps it was all of this hardening and specialization in the art of survival that impressed his associates enough to nick name him Doc Kelly. He seemed to know more about where to find good free food than anyone. If anyone got sick Doc seemed to know how to tend to the illness. He was a natural psychologist, which was especially useful for most of his friends. But, more than anything else he was loving and strong for them.

When he realized that the people needed a little boost, he organized an aluminum can collection that cleared about \$75. They all gathered around the fire barrel that evening for a gourmet hot dog and wine social. It had been years ago but it was a legend “the street” still remembered fondly. Maybe this was the reason the TV reporter wanted to interview Doc. They liked unusual characters.

Jeremy Kelly had come home early because his family and he were going to fly down to Birmingham for Thanksgiving. It was about 6:15 and the television was tuned to the local news channel. Sally had everything already packed but she always left his shaving gear for him to deal with. As he attended this little chore, a leggy blond reporter was saying, “I would like for you to meet a remarkable man, Mr. Steven J. Kelly. Steven, how long have you been homeless?” She pushed the mike to his face.

Sally said, “Darling, you better look at this.”

Jeremy looked to the TV in time to see the slender, shabbily dressed man in a thread bare open coat say something about not really being homeless in an indignant voice. “My God, It’s Dad.”

The son had always known that his father lived in the DC area. He had badgered his mother for the details of his father. She had not given him all the details. Perhaps she wanted to spare him the embarrassment of knowing his true genetic makeup. Actually, she probably didn’t want him to know that when her first husband needed her the most, she let him down. Whatever the reason, he had tried to find his dad after arriving in Washington to take the new job with Paragon, Smith, and Johnson, Attorneys at Law. Of course there had been no telephone listing and after a while he just stopped looking. Now, he knew that his dad was still alive and living in the area.

On the way to the airport Jeremy cell phoned Clair in Richmond. Like her brother she had decided to seek employment after college near the DC area. Her cell phone rang as she walked along the third floor hall to visit her next patient. “Doctor Kelly,” she said exasperatedly, without looking at the caller ID.

“I’ve seen dad,” Jeremy said, without introductions. He explained the TV thing then said, “When we get back from Birmingham, I’ll call the station and find out where they found him.”

“OK,” Clair said, “but when you try to find him I want to go too. “Sorry I can’t come home this year for Thanksgiving.”

As soon as Jeremy returned from Birmingham he called the TV station. After hearing, “I’m sorry sir, we’re not allowed to give out that information,” about a dozen

times from people who didn't know anyway, he managed to speak with the reporter who did the interview. He explained the story of his father's coming to the street and how long he and his sister had been looking for him. The reporter began to see a real human relations follow up to her previous interview. She told Jeremy that she would help him find his dad if she could have cameras there at the first meeting. Jerry politely refused saying, "the first meeting has to be private, we've all been through too much." Actually, not knowing his father, Jeremy had no way of knowing how welcomed the first meeting would be.

Finally, the reporter said, "I'll take a chance that I'm doing the right thing, but if there is a story you have to give it to me."

Jeremy agreed and wrote down the general area where the reporter said she had first met his dad. Two days later he and Clair were standing near the Georgetown side of the M street bridge when a frazzled, bearded man walked stoop-shouldered toward them from the direction of Georgetown. His eyes seemed to concentrate on a spot just a few steps in front of his path. As he passed the staring brother and sister, he took off his dirty cap and held it in their direction saying, "Can you help me?" He didn't even stop walking because he had heard the probable answer to the question many times before.

The son reached into his pocket, withdrawing a money clip. He handed his father a five dollar bill then touched Clair's arm to stop her from making a donation. The startled older man stopped, looked into the young man's eyes, thanked him for his generosity and disappeared down a well worn path beside the bridge. Clair asked why her brother had stopped her from giving the man money.

“That might not have been dad,” he said, and added that if it wasn’t their father, the five would be all that the man needed. Then he reminded her that he only saw about fifteen seconds of video in the TV report. They had never considered the strategy of the first meeting. They just assumed that when they met their dad, he would want to see them again and the reunion would all be wonderful. Now, after seeing the man that they assumed was their father, questions begin to come to mind. Would he be embarrassed about his state of being? Would he remember them? Might his mental state be unstable? Would he want to see them? They had to take a chance that it would all be OK. They decided to wait for the man to reappear from beneath the bridge.

About fifteen minutes later they heard a rustling in the dry brush below the bridge. Jeremy could see the dirty old ball cap bobbing and swaying up the path. When the man came up on the sidewalk he saw them again and smiled. There was a twinkle in his blue eyes and his lips parted slightly with the grin to reveal well kept teeth. “Thanks again for the generosity,” he said with a gentle, clear voice.

The man was startled when Jeremy asked if he was Steven Kelly. Damn TV, Doc thought as he prepared to deal with these well dressed “do-gooders.” “Who wants to know,” he said, as he put on his street act.

Doc’s legs weakened as he heard Jeremy say, “We are your children, Jeremy and Clair.” Doc was not a fainting man but when he heard these words, buildings began to fly and twirl around in his head. His heart pounded in his throat. He wanted to run away as fast as he could. For the first time in many years he was ashamed of his cloths. He

needed to be propped up so he wouldn't fall down. Jeremy put his arm around his father's waist and steadied him like a soldier holds his wounded buddy.

The three of them talked for a little while then walked over to the crowded Starbucks across the street. When they sat down at the table, adjacent tables became suddenly vacant. The snooty looking clerk behind the counter look annoyed as the son ordered lattes for the family. Their conversation went on for a few hours, punctuated by held back tears and laughter. Finally, Jeremy said, "We're going to have a little Christmas get-together on the 24th, can you come?" "Is your mother going to be there," Doc asked? "She can't make it this year," the son replied.

Doc nodded his affirmation, wondering if he really should. He knew the years could never be replaced, yet he also knew that he couldn't give up on this new connection with his children. The wisdom of thirty five years on the street told him that it would all be as it should be, no matter how it was.

Clair hugged her father, kissing his cheek above the beard. The years of living smell in his cloths was not noticed at all. Very softly she put a neatly folded twenty dollar bill in his shirt pocket. Somehow, Doc, the keen observer of reality, didn't notice his daughter's contribution. Jeremy shook his father's hand; the grip of both men was firm. They embraced while still holding each other's right hand. On the sidewalk they parted company. Jeremy and Clair went left to the car and Doc turn right to the bridge. "He won't come, you know," Clair said. "I know, but I know where he lives," was Jeremy's reply.

Doc was supposed to arrive at his son's house, only four blocks away, at 7:30 on Christmas Eve. At eight thirty, Jeremy knew his dad wasn't coming. He hopped in the car and headed for the M street bridge. A block from home he saw Doc walking with a fine matching speed and great determination in the direction of his house. Somewhere Doc had found a pair of pants and suit coat that almost matched. He was still wearing the same pair of tennis shoes but all in all he looked pretty good. Jeremy did a u-turn at the next intersection and caught up with his father nearly at his destination. "I'd give you a lift," the son said with a chuckle, "but you're almost there."

Doc did look good. His earlier trip to the cloths pantry at the shelter had paid off in lucky finds. In addition to the nearly perfect suit, he found a white shirt in his size, a paisley print tie that he really liked, and best of all, he found a Fedora hat that almost fit. With a little news paper folded in the sweat band it was perfect. He took advantage of the shower at the shelter and when the muddy water had disappeared down the drain, he came out smelling of Camay. The cloths and shower were free but Doc decided to make a five dollar donation to the Salvation Army. His hair and beard had been trimmed by Jack Barns, his neighbor on the other side of the bridge. Jack had chuckled and said, "Damn! Doc you look like a working class fellow." Doc's reply in an uncharacteristically trembling voice was, "If only I was." This was how he walked through his son's front door, the guest of honor, on Christmas Eve.

The party was great! There was plenty of punch and eggnog. The place was full of color and sparkle from the Christmas tree and candles on the mantle. A cozy fire crackled in the fireplace and laughter from the guests filled the house with its own special warmth. Jeremy had invited people from his office, all legal types, and of course Clair.

She rushed to her father giving him a great big hug and kiss on the cheek, then said, “Merry Christmas, daddy.” Doc struggled to hold back the emotions welling up inside him. Jeremy and Clair took turns escorting their father throughout the townhouse introducing him to the guests.

For the first time in many years Doc sang Christmas carols, ate cookies and little broccoli flowerets with ranch dressing. He danced with a heavy set lady to the music of “I Saw Mama Kissing Santa Clause,” in the dinning room and then “Rocking Around The Christmas Tree,” in the living room with a wiry, bewildered looking little Jewish woman with a Brooklyn accent. At the end of the dance she smiled and said “Wow!”

When the guests had all gone, Jeremy and Clair gave Doc his Christmas presents. The box from his son held a large Swiss Army knife with all sorts of implements. He already had one but he didn’t tell Jeremy for fear of hearting his feelings. He decided to give his old one to Jack and keep the new one from his son. Clair handed him a large box.

The present from Clair was a “sub-zero” sleeping bag. Of course he also had a sleeping bag, but it was ready to be discarded. The new one had better warmth characteristics than the old one. Not to mention the warmth he would feel because it had come from his daughter. From the inside coat pocket he pulled out two envelops.

He handed one to each of his children. They opened the hand drawn Christmas card that said, “You’ll never know my true joy at my most precious gifts this season.” Folded neatly inside was a crisp new ten dollar bill for each of them. In unison they said, “Dad, we can’t take this.” He said, “This was a gift to me from heaven. I’m just sharing

it with you.” They knew it was important to him and they accepted it with tears of love and thanks.

As Doc headed for the door, Jeremy said, “It’s cold out there tonight, dad, I’ll take you home. Doc said, “Thanks son I’m use to this weather I’ll be alright. Besides, I have the warmth and memory of the evening to help me along.” Then he promised to come back for lunch on New Years day.

In the early morning hours of New Years day, the friends gathered in the cold night air around the fire barrel behind 2295, M Street. No one knew how long this New Years Eve tradition had been going on but his friends and he kept the tradition going by celebrating with gusto. Actually, the fire barrel, which was known on the street as the “Country Club” was the usual place for socializing for the street dwellers. By some kind of holy miracle those who were to received Social Security checks received them a few days early this year. Thus an unusual quantity of Wild Irish Rose for toasting in the New Year showed up at the Country Club. Doc, still euphoric from the reconnection to his children, was feeling particularly hungry and charitable this year. Despite his inebriated state he made a quick mental calculation and decided to spring for pizza for everyone. At about 1:30 he headed over to Giovanni’s all night pizza parlor to get pies for the whole group.

Ending No. 1

A soft misty rain, of cold foggy micro droplets, settled on the streets and buildings near DuPont Circle. Maybe the star-like sparkle of the street lights confused the New Years driver on his way home. The five speaker XM radio in the Lexus played a tune

from the driver's teen years and he hummed along in an altered state of consciousness. The muffled thud just seemed like part of the bass line played by the Grateful Dead bass legend, Phil Lesh. Later in the dark morning hours before sunrise this mist would freeze and turn into a light, seemingly clean fluffy snow that purified the city. Any tracks or other evidence of the hit and run would be scrapped away in the morning by the snow plow, and as the snow melted in the unusual January warmth, all the transgressions would be swept away. From their high night roost, awakened pigeons blinked, ratcheted to the ledge to briefly peer at the body lying in the cold damp street below. When the authorities arrived an hour later there was no need for those ledge dwellers to see what was going on, they had seen it all before.

It was actually the street family, pissed off because of the delayed pizza, who found Doc's body. They summoned the police who put up tape and swaggered around the area looking for clues and called for the paramedics. There was the routine questioning and of course, no one had seen it happen. Usually, that would have been a lie but Doc was one of their own. If anyone of them had seen anything the truth would have been given to the police. One of their own had been harmed. It made the street seem unsafe.

A few days later the friends met at the Salvation Army Shelter to get some clean cloths for the funeral. Jeremy and Clair had been asked by the funeral director if they wanted Doc dressed in a new suit but they chose, instead, to dress him the way their father had come to the party. They found his Christmas cloths beneath the bridge in a cardboard box next to the new sleeping bag. Next to the pillow of rolled up newspaper

was a worn black and white snapshot of their mother, forever preserved with her teen aged smile.

The actual send off was held at the Mission Hall. There was one store bought arrangement of flowers provided by Jeremy and Clair. There were also hundreds of other flowers in tea glasses, cracked coffee mugs, and tin cans. Most of the flowers were faded plastic or silk arrangements. None of the graves around DC were missing flowers but there were many that seemed decorated a little more sparsely than they did a few days before.

There was the usual singing and prayers offered by the minister, who really didn't know Doc, but thought he had seen him once years ago. Jack Barns, Doc's closest friend, from the M street bridge, and had known him the longest, gave the eulogy. Everyone was surprised at the strength in his voice and Jack's command of the language. No one ever knew that Doc's friend had been a highly decorated officer in Viet Nam. He spoke lovingly around and through sobbing tears of the wonderful memories Doc had left with them.

It all reminded Mary Sleigh of a great event that Doc was involved in on the street. Nearly everyone sighed when she, quite unexpectedly, stood up to speak. She had not had a chance to visit the clothes closet at the shelter before the funeral. Her outfit was her usual combination of bright colors underneath the coating of street residue. She actually looked like she had been dressed by the costume department at Universal Pictures to play the part of a street person. It was the aroma that let everyone know that she wasn't playing a role. She had been released from a mental hospital twenty years

ago. Neither family nor friends took her in but she was a survivor. For a while the Shelter was able to get medication for her but the laws changed and the chemicals changed to alcohol. On the day of the funeral she just wasn't herself. She stood at her seat loudly mumbling something about when Doc would return with the pizza as tears rolled down her cheeks. The street family cried and agreed that it was the most moving tribute to Doc.

Later they all sang Amazing Grace as Doc was lowered into the little piece of ground purchased by his children.

It was a lovely, calm, cool, sunny January day in Georgetown, as the funeral ended. Doc's friends and children shook hands, hugged, and promised to keep in touch. The old family returned to the townhouse. The new family returned to the fire barrel for their own ceremony.