

Stories of Hope

“Todd”

Todd pulled his parka around him. The zipper was useless now, broken long ago, but he had devised a way to keep the jacket close around his thin frame. A simple leather belt closed the coat across his chest, and could act as a weapon when Todd needed it. He kept his hands near the large silver colored buckle at all times. Todd glanced at the electronic clock at the bank across the road. It was 2:35 am. He had only slept about an hour since the last time he looked. It was a cold night, but tomorrow would drop to 15 below. At 15 below, even the heater at the parking ramp wouldn't keep Todd warm, even with his parka pulled tight around him and two pair of pants. Todd glanced at the clock again. 2:37. Time didn't move very fast in the bleakness of the winter night. If he couldn't sleep by the time the clock read 3:03, he would walk to the all night gas station. He had a buck from getting aluminum cans out of garbage bins for the endless cup of coffee. When Todd woke, his bones aching from the cold and soreness of the concrete, the clock read 4:04. He had to move now. Commuters would be arriving soon, and Todd didn't want to be picked up by the police again.

At the gas station, Todd got his cup of coffee. The attendant there was one of the nicer of the new recruits for the graveyard shift, and he placed a cookie on top of the coffee. It seemed to Todd the boy must have barely been shaving, but Todd took the cookie. He quietly went and sat in the corner, trying to warm up and kill enough time until he could walk into town.

At 6.10, Randy, one of the caseworkers comes into the gas station. Todd was lucky to be there when Randy arrived. Randy asked Todd how he was. Todd said he wouldn't make it another night outside 'cause he heard about the deep freezing conditions. Todd was a man who had worked most of his life but his depression, the resulting psychosis and his alcoholism were so severe he just couldn't go to the homeless shelter. He couldn't make it there. Randy offered him a hotel voucher for the week, providing he kept the agreement to keep off the alcohol, take his medication, look for work and be on the 'program'. Todd reluctantly agreed—taking the voucher was better than freezing, even though he would be under the thumb of someone else. Tonight he would be warm and in a bed.

At noon, Todd could get his only meal of the day at the Salvation Army. Of course he had looked in the garbage at the gas station, but the discarded drinks were frozen and there wasn't much food there this time of the year. He found a smoke though--by squeezing the tobacco out of a half dozen cigarette stubs and into a piece of paper, Todd was able to make a dig for himself. He didn't think about the six people were who smoked the cigarettes first. So, he silently lined up for the hot soup, spaghetti, canned carrots, pears and a hot roll. The roll wasn't hot, the juice

from the pears had gone into the spaghetti and carrots, but it didn't matter much. Tonight he would be warm and in a bed.

By the time Todd made it to the hotel that night he was exhausted from moving all day to keep warm. Even the belt didn't keep the frigid air from going up the dirty sleeves and down the back of his neck. Tonight he would be warm and in a bed.

The room Todd was given could hardly be called a hotel room. Blasts of cold air and snow came in under the door. The central heating system was broken, and so Todd, huddled in bed under all the blankets in the room, had little more protection from freezing to death than he had the night before. The small space heater ran all night, but did little to counter the blasts which came from under the door. The towel stuffed in the crack helped some.

How Todd managed to sleep even he doesn't know, maybe the exhaustion overcame him. When he recognized dawn, he got up to use the toilet, but the water in the bowl had frozen.

Randy checked up with him again at 8.00 that morning. He dropped off a small bag of food and a few bus tokens. Fortunately for Todd, another room in the 'hotel' opened up, and he was able to transfer rooms. He did have a warm bed and warm room for the week. Todd wouldn't freeze to death that week and with the bus tickets he could now start his search for work.