

Homeless

Emma Johnson

The three of them sat together as the dusk settled softly around them. Sam shifted on his cardboard as he listened to Bob and Mindy bantering, and peered through the foliage, black against the pink and twilight blue sky. He thought he could make out a planet glimmering hopefully, competing with the light now emanating from the skyscrapers and city lights. His stomach rumbled and he pulled his sleeves further down over his hands and clutched his tattered, dirty coat tighter around his body, the newspapers stuffed under his clothes for insulation rustling. He leaned back against the gardener's shed, his eyes closed, lulled by the murmuring of his two friends.



He woke two hours later in answer to the familiar, dull ache of hunger. He rubbed his hands over his weatherworn face and grey-streaked beard. He sat for a while, looking into the starry sky. He was in no hurry — he was unhindered by work or any agenda. He smiled contentedly. He had everything he needed right here — freedom to come and go as he pleased, and his friends.

The night was clear. Bob and Mindy had woken with him and they carefully folded their cardboard mattresses and newspapers, stowing them in plastic bags against the wall of the shed, well hidden by the surrounding bushes.

They set off together through the park, Mindy quietly humming. Sam listened for a bit, then broke into a loud, made-up song, composed about the passing people, giving them imaginary

names and singing about their clothes, until Mindy shushed him, embarrassed at the looks they were receiving. "People'll think you're crazy, Sam!"

Sam grinned at her, "Nothing wrong with being happy!" But he ceased singing, and chatted to Bob instead. A woman coming towards them veered away to the other side of the wide path.

"Don't worry about Sam, love, 'e's 'armless!" Bob called. She gave him a startled glance and increased her pace.

Sam, Mindy and Bob crossed at the lights, swept along in the surge of people. Down the busy street they wandered, gazing through windows at people sitting at tables eating. Sam's stomach rumbled at the tantalising smells that wafted through open doors.

Mindy approached a small group of people standing outside a café chatting happily. "Ya wouldn't have any spare change on you for a pie, would ya?"

The two men standing closest shook their heads and turned back to their conversation. The others acted as though they couldn't see her. Not overly worried, the three shuffled off, stopping a friendly looking man in a black business suit.

"Got any spare change, mate?" Sam asked.

The man looked as though he'd rather be anywhere but here right now, and shouldered past him, muttering "No, sorry".

"That's all right, thanks, mate!" Sam called after him. The man looked over his shoulder. How could this homeless man, with not a single possession, be reassuring him that it was OK to keep from him what was obviously his means of staying alive? He appeared to hesitate, then gave one quick of shake his head as though trying to clear his vision, and hurried on.

Sam tried another man. "Any spare change for a pastie?"

The man stepped back as though Sam was covered in festering sores. "You aren't spending my money on alcohol, you dirty bum. Go back to your ditch!"

Sam blinked. He didn't bother replying, just turned away and followed Mindy and Bob across the road to a Chinese pastry shop, where a lady gave him some change she was trying to shove into her purse as the bakery door swung shut behind her.

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Sam ate his pie and Mindy and Bob chatted happily as they made their way back through the park, lit up by bright orb lights that lined the path. Back at the gardener's shed, shivering from the cold, they settled down to sleep. Watching the little puffs of mist his breath formed in the crisp air, Sam dozed off.

He awoke some time later to the terrifying sound of a man screaming, screaming and swearing at someone to go away, leave him alone. Bob was gone. Leaving Mindy to sleep, Sam crept away to find him. The screaming intensified and Sam broke into a shuffling run. He reached the edge of the park, and looked over the road at Bob, who was standing alone in the shadow of a high-rise apartment block, trying to fight off his invisible tormentors. Sam cried out to him. Bob's violent thrashing and screaming stopped, his body shaking, his face wet with tears. Sam took Bob's arm, leading him, whimpering, back to the park.

Halfway back to the shelter, Sam stopped short, a sudden, dull pain in his left arm. He sighed. He was too old to be running around. Breathing deeply, he proceeded more slowly. By the time Sam reached the shed, his left side was burning. He started to crawl through the bushes, but exhausted, he just lay where he was. He stared at the leaves centimetres from his face, Bob and Mindy chattering away to him as always. He smiled as he listened, and closed his eyes.



When the gardener started his shift early the next morning he came across the old man who had lived by himself in the park for as long as anyone could remember, his body half hidden by bushes. The wrinkled face was softened by the crinkles at the outer corners of his eyes, caused by years of laughter, and across the blue lips, the gardener could have sworn, remained the traces of a smile.



Emma Johnson wrote this essay in 2007 when she was in Year 12 at Scotch Oakburn College, Launceston, Tasmania.