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Another Day in Paradise

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Another Day in Paradise

Robert knows he and Becky need to leave. They have no business being here. In his mind, coming to St. Pete was a mistake.

“I’m sorry to have you out here on the streets, love,” he tells her as they survey the small community they’ve made with the other homeless people. “I feel bad about it.”

“I know ya do, Robert,” she answers him. “I know.”

Her eyes follow his gaze at their surroundings. From the middle of Tent City, it looks deceptively festive, like the circus coming to town. But the reality is that living in the encampment is anything but festive; it is a cold, hungry black hole in the middle of one’s soul, gnawing away at them every bit as much as the lack of food.

Robert thinks for a moment, making note of what little they have in their tent: besides one change of clothes apiece, there’s the *Finding Nemo* sleeping bag they found in the dumpster behind a convenience store, a can of Bugle tobacco, a six-pack of Budweiser, half a tube of stale crackers and a can of Vienna sausages. Somewhere in there is a Cuban cigar Freddie has given him in trade for half a bottle of beer. Robert is holding onto it, saving it for when they have something to celebrate.

He glances up at the sky. It had been sunny this morning, the bright blue color hurting his eyes. But now, the clouds have moved in. Robert realizes it’s just a matter of time before they let loose. Sighing, he sits down on one of the cinder block-chairs in front of the tent.

What a life, he muses, looking back at the clouds as the first drop splatters on the sidewalk nearby. *What a messed-up life.*

Robert sits inside the tent. In all the years since his father had died, he never thought he'd find anything his dad had left him to be so useful, at least not the way the tent had. He always figured he'd find some enjoyment from Dad's extensive book collection, or come up with some project or other to use the older man's tools. But after ending up on the streets, asking his sister to kindly keep the boxes of treasures in her attic, he'd realized that the one thing he'd given the least amount of thought to—the tent—had proven to be the most useful.

He listens to the steady plick-plick-plick tap of rain hitting the tent and glances over at Becky. His sleeping wife has crawled inside the sleeping bag, trying to get away from the damp. He smiles, contemplating how many times he'd gone camping with his father, using this same tent, crawling into sleeping bags in the evening, finding the accommodations somehow just right. Since Robert and Becky have been on the streets, he's found himself remembering his father at odd moments. *How ironic*; he'd thought of the older man only sporadically since he'd died, and now his father is on his mind on a daily basis.

He stretches out on the sleeping bag, careful not to wake his wife.

He recalls the last time they'd been camping. They'd planned to go into the mountains outside of Boulder for a week. On the way out, the sky had been an amazingly beautiful shade of blue, the kind of high, clear, breathtaking blue that makes anything seem possible. Dad had planned to show him a spot where he'd taken Mom while on their honeymoon, a place near a river so clear a person could practically count every pebble on the bottom of the riverbed, could count the scales on each fish swimming by, ready to catch for dinner cooked over a campfire. It would have been great, if it

hadn't started raining the first night of their trip, continuing until the day they head home. Halfway through the two-hour drive, the clouds parted, allowing blue sky to peek through; by the time they pulled into the driveway, there wasn't a cloud to be seen.

Robert sighs. He never thought that a little thing like his dad's tent would be the most useful thing he'd inherit.

He rolls over and tries to sleep.

In the morning, Robert wakes to find that the rain has let up some. Not entirely, perhaps, but now it is more like a light drizzle.

He opens his eyes to find Becky peering at him.

"What is it?" he asks, rubbing his eyes as he slowly sits up.

"Police are here," she states.

Robert groans. That could mean any number of things. Since Tent City first started, it seems the police were as much a constant as the hunger, damp cold and general gloom that permeated the homeless.

"Whadda they want this time?" he wonders out loud.

Becky gazes at the tent opening, then back at her husband. "They said somethin' 'bout the medical van showin' up. Anyone has anythin' goin' on hasta check in."

"That'd be good," Robert shrugs. Then standing as much as he can inside the tent, he wanders out in time to see Bayfront Medical's motor home pull up, Doc Greene at the wheel. *Good*, Robert thinks. *Best damn doctor they got...* "Becky, Doc Greene's with 'em today."

She smiles, easing out of the tent. Robert knows she has a slight crush on the young resident. *That's fine*, he thinks. *We all have our dreams.*

And to think his had been finding work in St. Petersburg.

After checking in with Doc Greene and getting some medicine for Becky's cold, Robert spies the Preacher on the edge of the encampment. He's busy talking to Freddie and Ginger, probably asking how they're faring. Freddie has that hacking cough that he just can't shake. Who knows, Robert sighs, maybe Preacher's found them a warm place to spend a couple of nights.

"Hey, Robert, here comes Preacher." Becky reaches over and puts her hand on Robert's knee, pulling him out of his daydream. Sure enough, the Preacher is picking his way through the tents, heading straight toward them.

Robert stands up painfully to greet the clean cut man. Since shattering his leg at work, several years earlier, Robert finds himself in constant pain. Sometimes it's worse than others, like now, with the weather so cold. But what can he do? He can't work; he and Becky both on disability, and no insurance for the operation he knows might make his leg better, the pain more bearable. Still he stands, in deference to the man who's been trying so hard to help the Tent City residents.

"What brings you here today, Preach?" Robert asks, extending his hand.

Preacher looks Robert square in the eye, nodded to Becky, then smiles as he looks back at Robert. "I got hold of your sister Jessie. She says she's got room for you two at her place. I stopped by the Greyhound Station on the way here and picked you two up a

pair of tickets. It'll take you a couple of days, but this time next week, you should be settling in nicely at her place.”

“Jessie,” Robert breaths. “Indianapolis.”

Suddenly, he and Becky are tearing up, hugging Preacher, each other, being congratulated by Freddie and Ginger and half-a-dozen residents.

So the journey begins...