Small Offerings

In 1995, I was living in a tent in the southern Appalachians, trying to stay sober. I was twenty-eight years old, working at a camp for the summer, keeping notes of it all. During the day, I lifeguarded by a lake, teaching young girls how to save themselves and each other from drowning. In the afternoons, I cleaned the locker room, sprayed out the shower stalls, collected items that had been left behind: wet socks and towels, Band-Aids and barrettes, zinc oxide and bug spray. I ate bologna sandwiches and mac-n-cheese in the mess hall, drank a lot of red punch. I hadn't had a drop of alcohol for six months.

Now, no one would guess by looking at me what my life had been like back then. Maybe this is true for many people, but even the me back then wouldn't recognize who I've become. My former self and I are strangers.

To the outside world, before I got sober, I looked homeless. I remember one spring afternoon I was walking near the Inner Harbor in Baltimore wearing a long peasant skirt with hiking boots, a crushed felt hat pulled down over my eyebrows (it was the 90's) and my favorite coat—a plaid, brown, wool jacket with a torn liner and holes in the pockets that my father had tossed out. I'd retrieved it from Dad's trashcan and wore it everywhere. That spring day, walking by the harbor past tourists, I distinctly remember thinking that I had a sense of style to be envied, that in fact, people who saw me *were* envying me.

Then, two tourists approached me. "Here," they said and tried to press some change into my palm. I was baffled. Did they think I was someone else? A tour guide

offering to lead them somewhere? I gave their money back to them. I assumed they were foreign and didn't understand my artistic sensibilities.

But these things kept happening. On a damp, foggy morning when I was hung-over and walking across the square in Fells Point, I asked a man seated on a park bench if he had a pack of matches so I could light my cigarette. He recoiled and shook his head. He was frightened of me. *Of me*! Couldn't he see that my oversized fringe suede jacket was cool? That I was an artist and looked this way for a reason? A few minutes later I spied a homeless man who'd made the area around the market his home. He was smoking a cigarette, so I asked for a light. "Sure," he said and handed me his butt. I gave him two new cigarettes as thanks. I said, "That guy over there on the bench was afraid of me. Can you believe that?"

"Some people," he said. "How long have you been out here?"

"About five minutes," I said, oblivious to his meaning. We made small talk and then I walked away, fingering the change in my pocket to see if I had enough for coffee. The difference between us was slight.

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Now I live fifteen minutes from the Inner Harbor with my husband, two dogs, two cats, and a white picket fence. But Danny, our handyman, lives in the woods. He's been there for the past two years. He's a wiry, elfish man is in his sixties with long hair pulled back into a ponytail and a full white beard. No front teeth. He smiles a lot, cleans himself in a church bathroom, and rides his bicycle from job to job, a gallon bucket filled with paint brushes hanging from his handlebars. He is a meticulous house painter, even if he mutters to himself and takes off early to drink.

He also knows everything that's going on in the neighborhood. He knows when the Royal Farms store gets robbed. He's got the skinny on the crack-addict and his girlfriend whose voices boom across our adjacent yards. Danny parties with the college kids one street away. They make fun of him, but they also give him free beer, so he doesn't care.

Before he set up camp in the woods, he lived in a wooden shed behind a neighbor's house. He kept the neighbor's grass mowed and, like a wood sprite, he decorated the bushes and trees with wind chimes, small ornaments and shiny, colored glass. I hadn't expected it to be so magical given that Danny was living in what used to be a chicken coop, but this is his neighborhood, too. He's lived here since he was a boy, though his house was torn down years ago to make room for a gated community that dead-ends our block.

In exchange for living in the chicken coop, Danny took care of the neighbor—"the old man" as Danny called him—who owned the shed and let Danny shower in the house. But the old man was obese and incontinent, a hoarder and ingrate who wouldn't take his medicine but took his anger out on Danny. After a few years of this, Danny got resentful. He is not well, himself, with C.O.P.D.—a chronic lung disease—and a bad diet. He got tired of cleaning up after the old man and decided to move into the woods, instead.

"Really?" we asked. "Are you sure? It's going to be cold in winter." We said this as if his shed had heat. As if it were insulated. As if the abuse from the old man were somehow worth it.

There was no changing his mind. “I’ve lived in the woods before,” Danny said with pride. “When I was twenty-five.” We didn’t mention that that was forty years ago.

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Me: I didn’t like Danny when we first moved into the neighborhood. I had no interest in knowing him. Lee and I were renovating a 1930’s bungalow and Danny was our house painter. He was doing a fastidious job of painting each room but I still felt annoyed by him. He blasted the radio. He had loud, angry conversations with himself while he painted, sometimes shouting in response to voices in his head. We had to ask him not to drink beer in the house. So he quit painting each afternoon when his hands started shaking.

Back then, I thought our relationship was temporary even though Danny lived across the street in a neighbor’s shed. My attitude toward him was not generous. I considered Danny a stray, a stranger, and for a long time I wanted to keep it that way. He was someone who did great work for a decent price. Lee was always finding people like this and inviting them into our lives. I just tried not to be rude.

Danny wasn’t sure about me either. He called me “Girl” either because he didn’t remember my name or was noncommittal about learning it. If he needed anything, he’d say, “Hey Girl, is Lee around?”

During the renovation process, when workmen were in and out of the house regularly, a man from one street over stopped by to say hi and welcome us to the neighborhood. He and I made polite conversation about our house color and new fence. “Which one is your husband?” he asked.

“He’s not here today,” I said, “but Lee is medium height with silver hair.”

"He's the man with long, white hair and a beard?" my neighbor asked.

"Oh, no," I said. "That's Danny. I'm *not* married to *him*."

I'm not married to Danny because he's homeless, I may as well have said.

The man cocked his head just slightly. "I just saw somebody from a distance with white hair going into your house a few times. He seemed nice enough, that's all." But that wasn't all, because I remembered it. I remembered the confused look he gave me as if to say, *"What's so wrong about being married to someone like Danny?"*

Here's the thing: I knew better. I worked for an organization that was dedicated to serving the poor. I saw homeless people every single day, in line for the soup kitchen, or to get free clothes, or receive rental assistance. I wrote grants so they could get help. And I knew from experience that many of these people were struggling, not because of laziness or addiction (though, yes, sometimes that), but because they didn't have the resources and safety net with family and friends that I did. They were poor because they had not been lucky. They hadn't been born the right color, or into the right circumstances with the right genes and the right opportunities. Or else, life had dealt them injurious blows from which they hadn't bounced back. There were a million ways to be poor, and I knew that to generalize was to dehumanize. Danny, himself, had had a terrible upbringing. He told us that his father, a member of the KKK, had shot and killed his mother when Danny was a young boy. That's one way you end up homeless.

So where was my compassion? Danny was in my own neighborhood, homeless, but hustling every day to earn a meager living, looking for work in a 10-mile radius where he could ride his bike. Did I mention that we live at the bottom of a hill, that everything around us requires an uphill climb?

And here's the other thing: I cannot forget that I'm also an alcoholic. I haven't had a drink for more than twenty years, but once upon a time I thought it would be a good idea to spend the night outside with the homeless guys who slept on a grate where warm air escaped from a restaurant kitchen. I passed these guys every night when my waitress shift ended. I gave them a couple of bucks and made small talk. I thought it would be fun to pass a bottle around with them, that it would be good for my "art." I had a boyfriend at the time who talked me out of that, even when I called him a buzzkill. A few months later, when that particular boyfriend was finally fed up with my shit (I could be a mean drunk), I ended up—while not exactly homeless—without a permanent place to stay. I floated between couches and spare beds for a couple of months, relying on the generosity of friends to take me in. Even with a roof over my head, I never felt at home in my body or the world. I envied other people's houses, looked in their windows at night trying to imagine living someone else's life. I wasn't sure where I belonged.

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When Danny moved out of the old man's chicken coop, he pedaled four of his cats, one at a time, up the hill, to his place in the woods. He transported them just like he pedaled everything else, a little red wagon attached to his bicycle by a broom handle and a chain. His artwork and trinkets, his sleeping pad, the plywood for his walls, all of it, he balanced on the wagon and pedaled a quarter mile uphill to the access road near the power lines where he plotted out his new digs. I say new digs and mean it— Danny shoveled himself a spot out of the hillside. He put a tent inside another tent, covered it with a tarp, and surrounded it by a fence to block the wind. He said that even on the

coldest nights it would be fifty degrees inside his tent. His new neighbors, who don't know he's there, live in million dollar homes.

That was two winters ago. We offer whatever help we can. We told Danny that on the nights when it gets into the single digits, he's welcome to stay with us. Our basement has a full bath and private entrance, so he can come and go as he pleases. But Danny doesn't want to leave his cats. He has lots of cats. He loves them, lives for them. They're feral. We have cats, too, and dogs. There is no way we can accommodate them all.

The first winter, when it started to get cold outside, we asked Danny what he needed to stay warm. Blankets? A heavier coat? "Candle stubs," he said. He didn't ask for much. Only what he could carry. We had plenty of candles, so I loaded up two bags and handed them to him. We also gave him my father's old Coleman lantern.

Last year, we spent Christmas morning with Danny. We ate egg casserole and pastries. Danny wore a red plaid flannel shirt tucked into his pants. His hair and beard were combed. He looked festive, like a skinny Santa with a ponytail. When it was time to exchange gifts, we gave Danny two gallons of Coleman fuel. He gave me an old, brass bracelet he'd found. An antique, he said. It had plastic beads and was heavily tarnished. He told me that if I polished it and replaced the two missing beads, he thought it would be worth something. It touched me that Danny had spent time rummaging for a gift for me. I wore the bracelet for a few hours Christmas morning. It's still sitting on my nightstand.

Danny leaves other offerings for us: t-shirts he finds; art supplies and old magic markers; a generic landscape print in a chipped frame; an accountant lamp that needs rewiring. We don't know what to do with these things. But when I loose my winter

gloves getting out of the car and Danny finds them on the street, he brings them to our porch and I feel grateful.

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November and December were mild this year. It was 70 degrees in Baltimore on Christmas day. But as the winter got colder and bitter with a record-setting blizzard and polar vortex, I worried. Lee, who has visited Danny's encampment, says Danny has built himself a strong fortress and knows what he is doing. Maybe so. But still. Last year, on a cold January night, a violent storm blew through. The temps were below zero and the air was razor sharp. I could hear the trees creaking and bending in the wind. My windows shuddered against big gusts and I was afraid a large tree would crash through our roof. It was a bad night to be outside alone in a tent. I felt scared for Danny and I prayed for him, crossed my fingers that his tarp and tents would not blow away, or that his candles and lantern would not tip in the wind and set his blankets ablaze. I woke up several times in the night thinking about him. The next morning, when the storm passed, I waited for Danny to pedal into the neighborhood, as always, to feed one of his cats, the one he couldn't catch, the one that still lived behind the old man's house.

But I didn't see him the next day or the day after that. When Lee told me later that Danny and his fort had survived the storm, I felt both relieved and frustrated. It surprised me how worried I'd become, how powerless I felt to help him. Danny says he's fine but when I saw him, he had a scratch on his nose, swollen and red, that looked like it might be infected. He got scratched trying to rescue one of his cats that had singed its tail (for the second time) after sleeping too close to a burning candle. Now he rigs tin foil buffers around his candles to keep the cats away.

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When I was living in a tent the summer of 1995, I tried to squeeze every ounce I could out of that experience. By mid-August, I realized that camp would end soon and I'd have to go back to Baltimore. I was reluctant to leave because I had nothing to go home to. I dragged my sleeping bag into an open field one cloudless, full moon night and slept under a large sky. In the middle of the night I sensed something stirring and woke. I saw, on the periphery of the field, a large family of deer, fourteen of them, silently eating in the moonlight. I watched them for a long time until I fell asleep again. It was magic.

Being in nature was good for me, a healthy detox. Everything felt like a miracle. I was grateful to feel grateful. I was seeing from a new perspective and that, in itself, was a revelation. I started to understand that the disease of alcoholism had something to offer me even as it had taken away almost everything else—my voice, my confidence, my self-respect. I wouldn't have noticed the same beauty that summer if I'd been drinking.

Sometimes I miss those simple days of living in a tent, dressing out of a knapsack, having the freedom that comes with few possessions and few choices. At that point in my life, there was a freshness to it all. But I'm also not remembering correctly. Those days came with their own stresses. When I left camp for the summer, I had no idea how I'd navigate the climb that would lead me to the rest of my life. At times, the financial instability I experienced was debilitating. Envy was a terrible threat, and my ability to earn a decent living was not instantaneous. So I have to be careful about romanticizing those days in the woods without remembering all the shit that came with it. And especially, I can't compare my experiences with Danny's. For starters, I'd been paid to live in that tent.

Also, I had resources. I had an education. I knew, I always knew, that I was smart and could get a full-time job if I really wanted to. I had a face that appeared trustworthy. I had all my teeth. I cleaned up well and had been relied upon to guard children and teach them. I could talk my way into jobs and I could perform well. Most especially, I had a family. They fed me when I visited, gave me gifts for my birthday and Christmas, loved me and let me know that I could stay with them temporarily if I needed to. I didn't rely on them to survive, but I could've. Knowing that helped me, separated me from becoming destitute.

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"Do you like peach or apple?" Danny asked me recently when he came to do yard work for us.

"What do you mean?"

"I've got Danishes." He reached into a bag to offer me one.

"Thank you," I said, "but you keep them both." I assumed he was sharing because he didn't want to be rude.

"No, no," he said, "I don't eat these. But the French pastry shop gives them to me for free. l like to give them away to people, so take both of them. For you and Lee," he said and handed me the bag.

"Are you sure?" I asked. I realized that the people at the French pastry shop—just like the neighbors who give Danny odd jobs, just like the police that know Danny is trespassing in the woods but don't hassle him about it—are trying to help him survive. The pastry shop gives him food thinking it's his sustenance, but, really, it's his currency. The pastries give him a way to connect, to be hospitable.

I have no idea how long Danny will be able to sustain his life in the woods, but he's already lasted longer than I thought he would. Yet, I can't imagine him living a different kind of life, the kind of happily-ever-after that makes advocates for the poor cheer and feel better. I don't know if a constellation of small miracles will line up for Danny as they did for me, and allow him the opportunity to get sober and live a better life. Who am I to want something for him that he doesn't want for himself—and who's to say that a conventional life is really better? Danny defies convention. Maybe once upon a time, when he was younger and stronger, when he had teeth, and a long life ahead of him, he might've been a handsome man; he might've been in love and gotten married; he might've made different choices and had it easier. But the life he leads now is still rich and connected, meaningful and important. Danny doesn't worry about what other people think. He lives on his own terms and that's what I envy most.

I might've had a different life, too, a harder, sloppier one. Everything I learned that summer in the woods—how to reach out to others to save myself from drowning, how to pick up the pieces and make order out of the mess—was important and necessary. I'm still learning. But I can't let the life I've accumulated pull me under in a different way, disconnect me from myself so that I forget who I am and where I came from. That old life is not as far away as it feels. All I'd need to do to return is to start drinking again.

Danny is my reminder. He reminds me to keep it simple. And when I fantasize every once in a while about running away, shedding responsibilities and the luxuries of modern life to live in a one-room cabin, Danny reminds me that it's not that easy. Also, he reminds me of "the stranger at the door" revered by the Benedictine monks. They believe in being hospitable to whomever shows up because the visitor could be a Christ

figure who needs to be clothed and fed, treated with compassion. Welcoming the stranger, they say, is an act of faith.

It's tempting to think of Danny as possessing some sort of rugged wisdom, as if he is a toothless, pony-tailed sage living on the side of a hill, in a remote fort. But the truth is, he likes beer and cats. He's a man who probably has P.T.S.D. and occasionally shouts at walls while he's painting them, chasing away old ghosts. He's also a man who is doing his best to survive, which is what we're all doing. He is resilient but willful, too stubborn to ask for help. And yet, every time I see him pedaling through the neighborhood, it feels like a small gift, a thing I didn't even know I needed.

This year for Christmas, Danny stopped by our house to wish us well. He held out a baggie full of rings and let me pick one. Somebody's aunt had a slew of costume jewelry that somebody else had given to Danny. He was happy to have a selection to offer. I picked a ring with a garnet colored stone. It was loose on my finger though I pretended that it fit. I'm not much of a ring wearer but I said thank you.

"Are you sure that's the one you want?" he said.

"It's beautiful," I told him. "I love it!"

I keep the ring on my nightstand with the tarnished bracelet as a reminder. I don't wear them, but I can't throw them away, either.