



A Simple Life

Each day John descended nine flights of stairs in building C of the projects because the elevator stuck months ago and was never fixed. Halfway down he stumbled gripping the railing to prevent a fall. Stairs were never easy; congenital defects fused his skeleton in odd places and he limped with an arched back and a withered leg.

Fifteen minutes later he boarded the city bus at Martin Luther King Blvd and 27th

Street for the hour-long ride to the university. Night still lingered when he banged on the double front doors of the indoor tennis center until security arrived to let him in. Inside, from the utility closet, he hurriedly gathered mop and broom, a slop pail, cleaning rags, and a spatula for scraping up gum before entering the member's lounge, always empty at this hour. He found the remote to the wall-mounted TV under a sofa pillow and tuned to his



favorite cartoon show. He laughed out loud at his cartoon friends' impossible antics and jerky movements so much like his own.

The entrance hall and corridors were mopped clean when employees began to arrive and, with broom and dustpan in hand, he climbed stairs to sweep the observation platform that overlooked the court where four men played. On the change of ends the men paused near the net pole to talk and joke.

"Hey, John!" one yelled as he arched a ball toward John with a solid hit of the racquet. John reached out, his broom clacking on the floor, but he was too far away to catch and the ball rolled into a corner. John waved. "Hey, boss," he said.

"Try again," the man called out as he hit another ball, much harder this time. It went between John's outstretched hands landing a sharp, burning pain on his chest; he stifled a gasp to appear unaffected.

"You aren't getting any better," the man taunted. The words hurt John more than the bruise on his chest but he would never complain; he craved the slightest attention as a welcome diversion from his routines. He gripped his broom and swept; the men played on.

At the noon lunch hour, John hobbled along the recently-shoveled, paved path that meandered through plots of snow-tinged dormant grass and scattered evergreens until he came to a small, ice-encrusted lake. A few feet from the water's edge, he sat on his favorite forged-iron bench, one of many facing the water that circled the lake.

A small shoal of fish gathered—brim, trout, perch, carp—and angled up to look at him, their mouths gaping, their gills pulsing in anticipation. From his pocket, John threw crumbs and scraps of discarded food he'd picked from the dumpster behind the tennis

center. He sniggered as tails propelled bodies forward and mouths broke the surface with swirls and splashes; in seconds, movement ceased, and all fish pointed in unison at him again in a pregnant calm. When he'd emptied his pocket, all fish left except for a gray-black koi that lazily held its position. John felt camaraderie in the line of that fish's unwavering gaze.

That night John shivered in the chill of his grandmother's government-subsidized two-room apartment. Grandma was his only family for the eight years after his parents and baby sister died in a car crash when he was twelve. A visiting every-other-day nurse gave grandma injections for diabetes and infections and monitored her high blood pressure and irregular pulse. But there were no other visitors.

John ate at a small table near the kitchenette that had a knee-high refrigerator on the floor and a white, four-burner electric stove next to a sink with drainpipes exposed. He sorted through leftover scraps from his grandmother's welfare meals delivered on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On Sunday, his day off, he walked a mile to the canteen for the poor at the Cathedral and ate chicken-flavored bullion noodle soup with carrot chunks—sometimes partially-thawed peas. For grandma, he carried home a cheese-and-mayonnaise sandwich on stale bread wrapped in a paper napkin that she rarely accepted and he usually ate at day's end.

A half-hour after dark, John kicked off his shoes to lie on his canvas camping cot that was against the wall and close to grandma's always open door. He pulled a wadded, threadbare

wedding-ring quilt over himself and positioned a coverless, crumpled feather pillow under his head. He was asleep in minutes.

“John! Bring my heating pad,” his grandmother shouted.

John turned over.

“Did you hear me?”

“I coming,” he mumbled, still groggy.

His grandmother’s crank-up hospital bed, angled upright so she could breathe better, filled her room; an always-on seventeen-inch portable TV sat on the dresser. Wadded wet tissues soiled with yellow-brown, blood-flecked sputum, scattered white-screw-top pill plastic containers, and a chipped porcelain coffee cup covered the bedside nightstand. The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke, dry skin, and soiled linens. He felt neither love nor affection for her, only vague worries that her scathing words might make him feel bad for causing her displeasure.

“Hurry. Don’t make me get of bed,” she said when she saw him. “I don’t feel up to it tonight.”

A few days later, John returned home from work; grandma was gone.

“She dead,” the project’s night attendant said. “They took her away.”

John had no skills to ask for help or plan for the unknown, so he sat on the floor, his back against the hall wall, waiting for something to happen. Finally, a neighbor gave him two cold fried chicken legs and told him to sleep in that big chair in the first-floor entrance hall. “Not good to be in the place where she died,” she said.

He went to work the next day. When he returned, his few possessions were scattered in the hall outside the apartment; grandma's brother had taken all the valuables and cash and John had been evicted. The neighbor said she couldn't feed him anymore, and the night attendant refused to let him sleep in that chair on the first floor. At the bus stop the next morning, the driver turned John away when he didn't have enough money for the fare.

At first, John begged for food until he learned to scavenge half-eaten meals from restaurant garbage bins and pick through overflowing trashcans waiting for pickup. Because warm spots were hard to find in residential sections, he slept mostly in business district doorways. He wandered for days trying to find the university and when someone finally answered his knock on the tennis-center door, he'd lost his job. He never thought about grandma.

One dark night near a high school, he bundled up in the entrance to the auditorium, avoiding closeness to a human lump-form of feminine clothing and blankets on the other side of the passage that didn't move as he settled in. A brown lab-collie-mix dog next to the form stared at him for a few seconds, then put its head back on its paws and closed its eyes.

Mollie McGuire woke slowly, sweeping her scraggly faded brown hair from her scarred and red blotched once pretty face. She rubbed her withered blue eyes with the heels of her palms. She tensed. A heap of wadded blankets with a purple-cardigan-covered arm sticking out half blocked the door to the auditorium entrance. The heap wriggled and a man sat up.

“Who are you?” she asked. She’d never seen such a sight of mismatched basketball shoes, ripped cargo pants, and at least two tee shirts under a gray sweatshirt. He had to be harmless. His blank face, gaping mouth, loose lips, and slow-moving, vacant, washed-out green eyes, made him look abandoned.

She rubbed the ear of the lab lying beside her.

“Don’t you talk?” she asked.

He blinked slowly once.

“Goddamn it. Say something. What’s your name?”

“Jha . . . John,” he said.

“That’s all? You’re just John?”

Her dog rose and sniffed John’s crotch, then nuzzled his outstretched hand. “Stop it, Bunkie,” Mollie said.

Bunkie lay down again next to her. “What’s your whole name, for Christ’s sake?”

“John Plumb,” he said.

God, he’s stupid, she thought.

“You got money?” she asked.

John obediently reached in his pocket and found a dollar bill and change that she scooped up from his open hand.

“That all you got?” she asked. John didn’t move. She’d not expected him to just give her money, but now she had \$4.87, enough for an egg and cheese biscuit and a small coffee. She kept the money.

She got up tucking her blankets into a shopping cart overstuffed with bedding, pots and pans, a poncho, an orange traffic cone, two postal cardboard mailing cylinders, a bag of pet

food, and two unwashed towels. “Look. With your money we got enough for both of us to eat. But you’re an idiot to be giving stuff away. You gotta take care of yourself, man; you won’t last. It’s a shitty world.”

John hadn’t spoken to many people on the streets and he’d always been hesitant to speak to girls, and he couldn’t respond now. But he rubbed the dog behind the ear and was rewarded with a friendly nudge.

“Come, Bunkie,” she said to the dog as she moved away with her cart. “Mind what I say,” she said to John, who still hadn’t moved. “And hustle up!”

John clutched his belongings and followed.

Mollie got sick with a flu, then her period came and made her feel worse, so she slipped away from John while he was begging and camped out in the basement of an abandoned auto-parts store. Two scavenged, rogue electric-heaters kept the place almost tolerable and with bad weather there were always a few homeless bundled up and sleeping on the floor.

For five days she left the hideout only to forage for food with Bunkie. On the fifth day, John came in through the back entrance. He carried a creased and torn cardboard flap from a large packing box to keep him warm and he settled in a dark corner, away from the center where three men congregated near the heaters. John waved to her but she didn’t respond.

A youth entered and planted his backpack on a dry spot on the damp dirt floor. He squinted in a darkness interrupted only by the glow from the wire coils of the heaters and took out a wooden nightstick a foot and a half long, raising it head-high in front of him. He faced John. “Who in the hell are you?” he snarled.

John grinned.

"What's funny? You think I'm funny?"

"You funny," John parroted, unable to think of anything to say.

The youth swung the nightstick at John's head; John's arm jerked up to parry the blow.

"Got no money," John said, and grinned wider in an attempt at friendship. He'd been accosted many times.

The youth perceived derision in John's vacuous smile and it inflamed him. "Liar," he said.

"No money," John said again.

The youth pummeled John with the nightstick.

"Oh, no," Mollie moaned. She was on her feet in an instant. "Stop," she screamed. She bent to pick up the aluminum walking stick she carried for protection. "He doesn't know what you mean."

"Shut up." The youth aimed another blow at John's head, but John's arms flailed, knocking the nightstick out of the youth's grasp.

John bent down to pick up the stick and hand it back. "I sorry," he said.

"You little shit." The youth raised the nightstick to hit John again.

Mollie closed in, lifting the walking stick high above her head with both hands. "He's trying to do you a favor!" With perfectly timed swings she bludgeoned the skull. Blood spurted from the scalp as the youth crumpled to his knees.

"You asshole," Mollie said. Nose bones crackled when she swung at his face. He uttered a weak moan and fell, his blood mixing with floor dirt in a dark stain.

Two homeless men stared. Mollie rolled the youth over.

"He's dead," one said.

"He's not dead," Mollie snapped. "He's breathing."

"I'm getting out," the man said.

"Me too," the other agreed.

Mollie didn't hesitate. "Get your stuff," she said to John. She packed what she could into a backpack and wrapped the rest in the blankets that she knotted on the top as a carryall. She left her shopping cart.

The four hurried in single file, keeping in the shadows and avoiding the few people they saw. It still rained. Mollie borrowed a burner from one of the men and called 911 to report the youth's location before the men left in different directions.

"Take this," she said to John, handing him her blanket carryall so they could move faster. Side by side they headed down alleys, across a park, and down side streets until they came to a main thoroughfare. Traffic was sparse. Stores were closed. Dark, low-lying clouds obliterated the sky.

They climbed a hill, passing homeless in doorways and on the street in the angles where buildings met the cement sidewalk. Mollie found a doorway big enough for the both of them. They settled in quickly.

"Why you crying?" she asked John.

"That man hurt."

She shook her head. "Go to sleep. He's not worth thinking about."

But John still worried about the youth's pain. And he didn't sleep well.

At nine o'clock in the morning an irate store owner threatened police arrest as he roused Mollie and John. Mollie had enough money to share donuts and coffee from a convenience store, then she headed for a mall to panhandle. John followed without question or invitation, living moment by moment, neither sad nor happy, and holding on to a few faded memories of a past that meant nothing. He knew neither regret or jealousy. Frustration irritated him but not injustice or attack, and he rarely felt anger. And he willingly followed Mollie; he felt safe around her.

Mollie and John sat on a concrete park bench, their stuff to the side and Bunkie near Mollie's feet, front paws out, head down. Mollie asked John: "How much you make today?" John showed two bills and a handful of small change.

"That's shit," she said. She used a black magic marker to freshen the print on her cardboard sign. "Please Help / Homeless and Lost."

"Humanity sucks," she said.

John didn't respond.

"Goddamn it, John. Say something. Anything. You're not stupid. It's like working with a stone."

"Not stupid," John said, totally unaware of the concepts Mollie's words carried. "Tree" was a tree for John; he didn't conjure images in his mind, he just knew what a word meant. But "stupid" was a word too abstract and it brought no meaning to his consciousness.

He doesn't know what it means to be alive, for Christ's sake, she thought. "Look, you meatball, start responding when people talk to you. Make them think you're feeling something. Get connected."

John said nothing.

“Just try. I said ‘humanity sucks.’ Say ‘yes’ or ‘okay.’ Something. Anything.”

John stared.

“Say ‘yes!’” she said loudly, without a response. She shrieked with frustration. “It’s ‘yes,’ goddammit!”

“Yes,” John said timidly.

“Like this.” She enunciated “yes.” She urged him on . . . he tried many times. “That’s better,” she finally said.

For the next hour she exaggerated word pronunciations with active lips and a lively tongue.

He listened. At times his eyes showed a faint spark of cognition, and from that day on she taught him before begging, and felt ballooning satisfaction when she saw his mounting eagerness to keep trying. He’s improving! she thought.

In time, he responded sometimes to people they knew, not always with logic, but with a touch of verve. And he seemed to emote, in dollops it was true, but with absolute honesty.

He liked Bunkie and told her “you good dog.” He got irritated when he couldn’t think of words, and said he was afraid when assaulted by bullies. But most of all, he had feelings now, and he was responding. The instruction continued.

On a cloudy day, waiting outside a soup kitchen on the south side, Mollie stood in front of John in a food line, Bunkie obediently at her side. Mollie and John were unwashed with uncut straggly hair and dirt under their fingernails. Twenty minutes later they’d progressed to a table attended by a male volunteer handing out paper bowls and plates, and plastic utensils. “Sorry,” the man said, “come back when you’ve cleaned up.”

Mollie's shame lasted only an instant until anger overwhelmed her.

"Cleaned up," John parroted, proud of his response.

"Damn it, John. This guy's an asshole." Mollie spat on the table. "Get angry. Let him know you don't like what he's doing."

John stopped grinning, his face blank.

"I feel like punching this bastard in the nose. I want to hurt him. Make him know he's a jerk."

The man's face reddened as he clenched his fists, his knuckles white.

"Jerk," John said nervously, reaching to rub Bunkie's ear.

"Move on," the man said.

"Bad man," John said when he and Mollie were a few yards away.

"Yes, John!" Mollie held up her grimy fist in a gesture of winning. "Get angry. Don't let them run over you, man. Fight back!" He understands. It's been worth it, she thought. He'll survive in the downside now, and maybe, someday, God willing, he'll find the upside.

"Let's go to the Fluffy Pancake," she said. "I could use a cup of coffee,"

"Coffee," John said.

"What do you think about coffee, John?"

"Coffee good."

Mollie smiled. "That's the way." She stopped and held John back by the arm; then, on tiptoe, she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Good job," she said, proud he was making judgments about things.

One January night the temperature crept enough above freezing that they could sleep in the open near the river. Dark clouds spotted the moonless sky, and shadows blended into shapes. Mollie, rolled up in her sleeping bag on her side with her down coat under her head, could barely see John, bundled up a few feet away, even though she could hear him breathing. He was awake. God, she needed to talk. He wouldn't understand, but she had to tell him anyway, to ease the pain of being alone this night. She began:

"I saw this guy a couple weeks ago who looked like a guy I knew when I was in college. This guy lit up and leaned over to me, maybe six, seven inches from my face. 'I've been clean for six months,' I said. 'Don't do this to me.' And he blew a cloud and I was like heading for nirvana again. I began to like this guy a lot, as if he'd seeped into my present from my past when I could love. Those were great days in college, John, days of expectation and yearning to be satisfied, and the belief that nothing could ever go wrong for me. But I didn't do it right. I shared pleasures and ignored responsibilities to prepare for my future. And this jerk was the devil, making me lose it all again."

"John. You awake?" She leaned over to pick up her walking stick and poked the middle of his bundled-up form. "You in there?"

"I'm here."

She smiled. He was there and he was awake and responding like he knew what the hell was going on in the world. She had to continue.

“He wouldn’t stop coming at me. His hand found my breast and I didn’t push him away. ‘I got good stuff, baby,’ he said. He put a joint to my mouth. I lost all the resistance I’d built up for months. Two weeks later I went back to him. ‘I need,’ I said. ‘I like you,’ he said, ‘but I ain’t no Samaritan.’ He held out his hand and rubbed his thumb and middle finger together like he wanted cash. But my four bucks wasn’t nearly enough. Then he said it outright: if I let him screw me, he’d give me as much as I needed. ‘I got a kid,’ I said. ‘I got a future.’ ‘You beautiful, baby,’ he said. I was so desperate, John. I did it.

Mollie cried silently. John was long asleep and made no sound. She wasn’t a whore, why was she doing this? But she couldn’t stop. In a rush of shame, she packed up and left.

John woke before dawn. Mollie had disappeared with all her stuff and Bunkie. He’d heard her talking about her man-friend, sensed the anguish but forgot most of the words he understood. Still, he was sad.

He panhandled for days, always looking for Mollie; she was never in the places he expected. He depended on her; she guided him through thinking about things. He couldn’t manage crisp thoughts yet. Thoughts were more like rainwater slipping down a storm drain. But he felt alive when he thought about Mollie, only five percent alive by most standards, but he’d come to believe life had filled to his brim.

After more than a week, he found Mollie with five homeless men and a woman in a two-car garage behind a user-artist’s studio. Mollie’s man-friend was there; John knew him by the way he touched her real friendly. Man-friend fed the party dudes, too, like a boss man.

Soon stagnant humans lay on the concrete floor—crumpled up, wrapped in blankets and coats, relaxed, eyes glazed, most taking hits from a joint being passed. Mollie, too. John waved but Mollie didn't respond; still his heart warmed on seeing her.

John found free-space for sleeping under a workbench covered with tools and lengths of pipe and two-by-fours. He bundled up and was almost asleep when Mollie's scream and moan jolted him awake. Her man-friend punched her in the face, kicked her in her groin with the pointed toe of a cowboy boot. Mollie screamed again. The garage went silent with stares and held-breath. For the first time, anger seized John. His face flushed, his heart pounded, his muscles tensed. He grabbed the nearest section of lead pipe as he climbed out from under the workbench and roared a long screech of hate. In six steps he closed in on the man-friend, swinging the pipe at his head. The skull cracked. The next swing hit full face and the man fell back on the floor. John hit him again.

Wind and rain grated against the aluminum siding of the garage, but inside the air was motionless and silent. People scrambled for the door. A few minutes later, the body of the man-friend sprawled on the floor alone, blood congealing, eyes wide and opaque, drooled saliva drying on the edge of the gaping mouth.

The court appointed Rebecca Abramowitz Esq. the public pro bono defense lawyer for John. Within days she became more emotionally involved with the defense than she had intended. John was handicapped and incompetent, guilty of consequence but innocent of action. She was determined to deliver justice.

At trial, two videos from in-garage security cameras detailed the blows to the head and brought moans of aversion from jurors and the public alike. John faced the death penalty. Investigators learned of Mollie's connection to John, and when Mollie approached Rebecca to ask if she could help, Rebecca took her for coffee in a shop near the courthouse. "Would you testify?" Rebecca asked. "About John's character. Who John is."

"Of course," Mollie said.

"How he thinks? What motivates him?"

"He was surviving, wandering the streets alone," Mollie said. "It scared me sometimes; he never seemed emotional."

"Did you have a relationship with him?"

Mollie bristled. "I didn't screw him, of that's what you mean. He's only a child."

"Is he violent?"

"No," Mollie answered. "He's not complicated."

"Why did he attack?"

"Not to kill," Mollie said.

"The guy was beating you."

"John is not a killer!"

"But the prosecution knows you were prostituting for drugs. Was John jealous?"

"He doesn't have it in him."

"Really? He yelled at the victim just before he landed the first blow. You can see it on the tape."

"He isn't capable of jealousy!"

"You were friends, weren't you? Was it revenge?"

"We panhandled for survival. That's not exactly friends. But I liked him."

"No one provoked him, did they?"

Mollie shrugged.

"The two of you threatened the volunteer at the soup kitchen."

"He was an asshole. Called us unclean. Turned us away."

"You threatened him with violence."

"No. It was unfair. There were losers in that line a lot dirtier than us. I just spit at him. John didn't do anything."

"You live in a culture of violence. Everything you say points to motive and opportunity for John. Did you know John was going to do this?" Rebecca asked.

"I hadn't seen him for weeks."

"Did you ever encourage him in any way?"

"No!"

"John saw you strike a youth in the head with a walking stick," Rebecca said. "The boy remembers the details."

"John was faultless."

"But he saw your violence."

"John's action wasn't planned, counsellor!"

"It will be hard for a jury to believe that," Rebecca said.

"I taught him how to stand up for himself. Fight back. What's wrong with that?" Mollie looked away to stare at the ground. "He reacted to an injustice, you know," she said quietly.

"He reacted to violence against you."

"A reflex," Mollie said.

Unsettled by the dark pain of guilt that had emerged deep in Mollie's eyes, Rebecca shrugged. I can't use her, she thought. She won't mean to, but she'll convict him. She quickly terminated their talk.

Late in the trial, John's nonchalant demeanor and constant grinning, at times humming abstractly, infuriated the prosecutor, who perceived the behavior as intentional, satiric disrespect. Rebecca unsuccessfully argued that John had reacted, not planned to hurt or kill, and was incapable of understanding the severity of his action. The trial dragged on. The verdict? Guilty as charged.

Rebecca visited John in prison, "Mollie?" was John's first word.

Rebecca searched for words. "Mollie's gone, John."

"Gone?"

"She won't be back. Do you understand?"

"Won't be back," he mumbled. His forlorn eyes were deep with feeling.

Rebecca had sought out Mollie to verify the details of the incident for an upcoming appeal. But Mollie was dead from a heroin overdose. Authorities labeled it accidental, but Rebecca wondered what had happened.

She just sat with John for more than an hour. He slumped in his chair, his ankle chained to an iron ring cemented in the floor, and looked down. But she was sure he appreciated her presence. Words were not needed. Minutes after she left, guards confiscated the box of chocolates she'd brought as a gift for John.

John survived a year and two months in prison. His subdued behavior and obliging responses enraged a fanatically deranged inmate who believed John was the incarnate antichrist in masquerade. In the exercise yard, the inmate plunged a makeshift knife into John's chest to stop the heart and gouged both eyes to cease the soul.