Denizens of the Exit Ramp

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I used to pass out socks to people holding signs at freeway exit ramps. I kept a bag from Costco in my Prius until a woman down on Franklin crabbed at me, "I don't want your damn socks." White women like to give you what they think you should want. I rolled up my window and ceased distribution until I got clear in my mind. After the camp set up next door, I stopped giving anything to anyone. I don't really know anymore what being a good person means.

By January, when the man was shot and killed, and MnDOT brought the bulldozers, a hundred or more tents were strung along 15th Avenue. At its peak, the encampment reached around the dead end and down the path to the Vikings stadium almost encircling the House of Balls. How many people lived there? Died there? I don't know. Perhaps you'd like to know their names and something of their stories. This is what I thought when it started.

The House of Balls is my husband Allen's sculpture studio. He uses cast-off stuff in his figures: piano parts, car doors, kitchen gadgets, and the eponymous bowling balls. He's always had an open studio. Seeing who comes through the door is part of the payoff for him. Here you don't have to buy a ticket or pretend you're shopping.

My mom died the day they cleared the camp. She died in a hospice for the indigent, though she had plenty of money. I think the nuns guessed what was

up because of the expensive cars my family parked in the lot. We sat in them with our heaters blasting. Only three of us were allowed in the building at a time. It was a cold, snowy January. The parking lot was rutted with ice. My older sister inherited my mother's Florida condo. Mom went to the charity hospice so "there'd be something left" for me and my younger sister. That felt like shit. As I write this, my heart pounds. My hands shake. I feel like a kid at Mass, being told God died for my sins.

The first campers arrived in late August. Allen and I were just leaving the State Fair when we got a call from a neighbor. Someone was pitching a tent in the House of Balls parking lot. We found them bivouacked by the front door, their tarp tied to the serviceberry tree. At first, you couldn't even see it, screened as it was from the street by coneflower and milkweed. "Excuse me," I said, jiggling a pole. A man unzipped the flap. Behind him, a woman met my eyes. Her hair was wrapped. Their pillows were fluffed, the air mattress plumped. "You can't stay here," I said. It's harsh to rouse people from bed. Allen gave the man a twenty. He took it grudgingly. Within an hour, they'd moved across the street to a vacant swath at the verge of the freeway.

The encampment grew like a runaway suburb. From the city's margins people came, the Quarry Camp, and the one on Hiawatha, pushed from other rights-of-way where they'd worn through their welcome.

Through September, I kept track of the original couple's tent. Then the camp filled with people and stuff, walkers, rugs, bikes, and bags of clothes, many still with tags, plastic sacks of spoiled hot dogs, and a child's hobbyhorse with a white mane and tail. I kept my eye on that horse. It was an anchor in the gathering chaos. Some of the sites were tidy and buttoned up; at others, loose tarps flapped on catawampus poles. Like a music festival, I told myself, or a camp on the perimeter of Burning Man.

Homeless encampment is not the preferred term. It's better to say people experiencing housing insecurity. Right? In college we called them street people. My dad called them bums and listened to music about hobos. George Orwell's term was down-and-out. You've got tramps, strumpets, and the deserving poor. We don't say any of that now. Calling people the right thing might help us believe we're actually doing something about their situation.

People of various ages and circumstances lived in the camp. The young looked old, the middle-aged elderly. No little kids. Quite a few teenagers. Some were unemployed addicts. Others worked at Amazon and Walmart or cleaned the empty office buildings that towered in the distant skyline. A few were newly

sober, struggling to restart. Many had left their homes out of love, a desire to avoid pulling their families further into their struggles.

Autumn 2022 was warm and dry. Our building abuts the Cedar–Riverside light-rail station, a bike trail, and a park. It's a good place to stay if you're living outside. They weren't going to move, and no one appeared in a hurry to make them. They'd become our neighbors. "Rent a fence" was the only advice on the city of Minneapolis website. "But if we fence it," Allen said, "it would stop being the House of Balls."

At first, we welcomed the campers like all our visitors. "What kind of store is it?" they'd ask, helping themselves to our chocolates. A bar? A restaurant? Did we live here? "This place," one fellow inquired, "is it hunted?"

"You mean haunted," Allen said.

"That's what they tell me, Mr. Balls," he said, popping a Hershey's Kiss in his mouth. "Hunted." They used the restroom, washed, riffled through the hygiene supplies. Before long we began to scrutinize visitors. After four decades as an open studio, the House of Balls wasn't open in the same way.

We continued to let them charge their phones at our outdoor outlets. I've been desperate for a charge. Haven't you? Before long, someone brought a microwave in a backpack, plugged it in, and made a midnight supper on the stoop. The microwave, the backpack, and part of the supper were there in the morning. They continued to get water from the garden tap. Someone wrote on the chalkboard, "Thanks for the water—God bless." By that time, I felt about "God bless" like that lady on Franklin felt about socks.

On Halloween we found an extension cord running from our building, across the road, under the fence, where a bunch of the tents were lit from within. Allen stalked into the middle of the camp and unplugged it. "You can charge your phones," Allen announced as the tents went dark, "but you can't be plugging in extension cords." He coiled the cord and left it near the gate because it wasn't one of his.

The next day Melvin Broom came in to introduce himself as a camp leader and to apologize, "If they mess up at your place, we tell them they can't stay. If this were a normal business, you would have been destroyed by now." He added, "You will be tested."

On the far side of the freeway, the arena rises like Oz. U.S. Bank Stadium, warm, empty, and out of the wind. Its shiny mass juxtaposed with the nylon fragility of the tent camp. I thought about their bathrooms and stainless-steel sinks. Tax money built it and keeps it heated. It's empty more than it is used.

The new stadium's fancy zinc shingles began to blow loose after the first winter. Water got in. Twenty-five million went to new zinc. Metallic siding or plastic tarps: the wind, wet, and winter challenge all shelters.

Help came. A Metro Transit custodian started bringing extra trash bags when she cleaned the LRT station. "Any bags you got ready?" she'd call as she walked along the fence. Once a resident emerged tugging rubbish on a bed sheet like leaves on a tarp. She deftly knotted the ends together and put it in her truck. I doubt that was part of her job. Her efforts made us feel less alone.

Cleaning up garbage became a thing that Allen and I did together. We'd put on leather gloves, take rakes and shovels, loading heavy-duty contractor bags. You learn a lot about a place by picking up trash. Seems the drinkers hung together on a flat spot near the tracks. That's where you found empty pints and crushed cigarette packs. The ground was coated in needles where the fentanyl users used. Residents sometimes pitched in. At times, we were thanked. More often they passed anonymously, wearing a look of determined distraction.

One Sunday when we were cleaning, we came across a young man prone on a mattress; his lips were blue. His friends rolled him on his side, pressed a Narcan inhaler to his nostril. Allen called 911. The police, EMTs, and a firetruck came. The man, now upright with an opioid shimmy, couldn't be convinced to get on the stretcher. The emergency responders watched from outside the camp. Narcan makes people aggressive, they explained. After a while, they loaded their empty stretcher and left.

The drug use was super sad. But it was the do-gooders that really bugged me. Slap-dash, one-and-done would-be angels, with restaurant kitchen leftovers, and expired burritos from Bobby and Steve's Auto World, wilting greens packed in black plastic with covers like clear coffin lids, which they'd leave on the cyclone fence, with croutons and extra dressing. Some of the stuff they brought was absurd: bins of Beanie Babies, bags of raw onions, and Arrow dress shirts still in cellophane. Once I watched from inside the studio while this guy in a pickup dropped his tailgate and started muscling an old window air conditioner out of the back. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I yelled marching out the front door.

"It's a donation," he said. "Someone will want it."

"Bullshit," I said. "It's almost winter and they don't have any windows. Get out of here."

We'd find so much brand-name stuff. I remember a stack of Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirts and a tangle of Levi Denizen black/brown reversible belts that at

first glance looked like a nest of snakes. Many donations were useful: tarps, tents, pillows, rugs. A portion would be, a week later, broken, bent, or abandoned. No matter; more goods will appear. People like to bring stuff. No one wants to take trash. Until I lived across from it, I never understood how quickly good goods could turn to rubbish.

I think my mom was a good person. She taught business skills, bookkeeping, typing, shorthand, and later computer skills. We got a stack of condolence letters from her students, many remembering my mom's insistence on precision. To produce a "mailable letter," one student wrote, you had to have zero errors, no Wite-Out. Anything less than perfection was unusable. This was on a clickety-clack typewriter, before autocorrect, much less spell-check. That former student went on to describe her own life of achievement, crediting my mother's strict standards. I'm just not sure about perfection anymore.

By early November, I couldn't see the hobbyhorse anywhere. It had melted into the muddle. That left me feeling unmoored. Night and day, a stream of struggling human beings passed our building. We started finding "House of Balls Camp" marked as the destination on the charity boxes. Allen claimed to be amused, but his brow creased and cheeks hollowed. I tried referring to it as the U.S. Bank Stadium Encampment, but House of Balls had already caught on. It didn't matter what it was called. Proximity had granted us a stake in its welfare.

After the pandemic and George Floyd's murder, Hennepin County spent a few million on places for unhoused adults. They showed them on the news. Cubicles in a warehouse with shared bathrooms, uncluttered and secure. But where was everyone's stuff? To live inside, they must forsake much of what they carry. I once watched a young woman pack, then unpack, her backpack, again and again. I was sitting out of view, behind grapevines, in a secluded part of the garden. She was standing near the light-rail track. She did it with great care, as if she were a clerk at a posh boutique. She was wearing boots with chunky heels and had streaks of bright color in her hair. The train had to lay on its horn to get her out of the right-of-way, so absorbed was she in her task. It was clear that each of those objects was precious to her.

I've lived in my house almost forty years. It's got an attic, a basement, a garage. I have furniture that belonged to my great-great-grandparents, musical instruments no one plays, and a slew of sentimental tech tucked in drawers and distant shelves: my BlackBerry, a Walkman, a rotary phone, and the MacBook I ran over with my car. The sight of it piled on my front lawn would bring me to my knees.

Soon after the first hard frost, Allen arrived to find that someone had made a fire next to the building with throw pillows and kerosene. A stream of polyester had trickled past the doorway, like a line of salt at a blessing, the scent of charred foam lingering like incense. Allen switched all the outdoor outlets off after that. People still plugged in their phones. Some took weeks to discover that they were dead.

I went to visit my mother at the senior-living home soon after. It was a warm day, though the leaves had all fallen. It was one of the last days she would ever sit outside, though neither of us knew that then. It was the 4 p.m. shift change. Staff members chatted with Mom. She knew the names of their children and dogs. "What have you been up to?" she asked me after the others had left. I always hated this question. I hadn't really talked with her about the camp. For years I'd steered clear in our conversations of topics prurient or worrisome. But you can't have a real relationship if you never talk about things that are actually happening. I went ahead and described the charred remains, the smell, and the garbage. I'm glad I did. I didn't mention needles, feces, or overdoses. Still, she was horrified. "Why don't they get jobs?" she asked me. "Some have jobs," I said.

"They're looking for people here," she offered.

"Some of the people who work here might live in a car," I said.

"Keep your voice down."

"Or on a friend's couch."

"Mare, you make everything so dramatic."

My mother's stomach cancer was diagnosed the next week. She and my older sister made all the decisions and informed me of their plans. My mother never much cared for my opinions. At ninety she was of sound mind . . . pretty sound at least. Her wealth was hers to do with as she wished. Yet it strikes me how often the gift goes awry, undoes what it's trying to do.

I was overwhelmed by the suffering of strangers. A fog of shame would descend when I talked about people in the camp. I sounded, at least to myself, pleading and needy. Sometimes I was lectured, as if getting my own life together might make my unhoused neighbors leave. My women friends worried for me and wanted to know what they could bring. Heavy contractor bags, leather gloves, garden rakes, a strong stomach and semi-open heart. The needles worried them. There were a lot, to be sure, blanketing the ground like a stand of white pine. Every week, the Southside Harm Reduction team brought their little red wagons with fresh needles and Narcan. The sharps container attached to the light pole was a nice gesture but laughably ineffective. Allen started setting them aside,

blunting their tips, hoping to eventually use the needles in a sculpture.

Finally, just before Christmas, I reached a guy at MnDOT. They couldn't do garbage pickup. They'd use bulldozers to scrape it clean at the end. The governor would have to approve my request to have the camp removed. "My request? Why's that up to me?" It was like that *Twilight Zone* episode where there's a button you can push and your wish is granted, but some other stranger dies. I wasn't going to request removal.

"Call us back," he said, "if you change your mind."

My mother's people are from Blue Earth County. They homesteaded in 1864 near the Little Cobb River, land that had been part of the Winnebago Reservation. The choice parcels they took up had been seized from the Ho-Chunk in retaliation for the U.S.–Dakota War, though the Ho-Chunk had stayed neutral. The Ho-Chunk women were not told they would be moved until shortly before they were driven from their homes and forced to walk to Mankato. Newspapers reported the awful keening as the women were marched up the gangway under guard. Down the Minnesota, the Mississippi and up the Missouri River, the Ho-Chunk arrived at barren Crow Creek too late to grow crops. Many died. Back in Blue Earth County, my ancestors took over their fields and homes.

Seven years ago, when we bought the House of Balls building, it was a wreck, on the market for years. It started as a gas station and ended as the Medusa, an underground performance space for metal bands. The roof leaked. The place reeked. We put what we had into it. Ripped out asphalt. Planted bee balm. Bit by bit, more paradise, and a little less parking lot.

That January of the encampment, our bucolic park seemed lost. Layers of garbage had hardened in the fallow gardens. Meanwhile, life across the street surged, churning, disposable, chaotic, pain-ridden life, the escaping-their-past, hunting-down-a-future people who were living next door. There's this thing about neighbors: over time, you can learn to appreciate even the worst. As long as the encampment was across the street, I didn't think about Ukraine, or climate change, or rents in our civic fabric. I wasn't afraid of "them" anymore, or of anyone living outside, on the train to downtown, or walking down Nicollet Mall, or on exit 234 on Cedar; I could look street folk in the eye and feel neither guilty nor fearful.

Eventually, MnDOT did provide a dumpster and, more importantly, a contact—a Mr. Skog, who took our calls. For Christmas, we got porta-potties, after a friend of ours cut through a tangle of unforgivable red tape. Of course, every solution contains the seeds of the next problem. Life is like that.

We had met some of our neighbors by then. Tanya worked as a package sorter at a warehouse facility. She told me how, on Christmas Eve, bags of groceries, each with a $100 bill, were left outside the camp. "They just left it there, so of course a couple of people got all the money." Amber was about my age. We cleaned together. She had given up subsidized housing in Milwaukee for a St. Paul man who became abusive. Giving up stable housing had been dumb, but leaving her abuser for the camp was the right call. Allen got to know Chad, whose wife and baby had died and his in-laws had settled their grief on him. Justin was another resident who would clean with us. He'd ask to use garden gloves and a rake. We'd make progress and then he'd start to get mad because people were such slobs. I'd stop, too, then because cleaning up when I'm resentful isn't good for me, or anyone else. Once when Justin and I were raking needles, this guy came up like he was going to ask for money. "Hey, lay off. That's Mrs. Balls," Justin said. The guy turned away.

Malique was one of the most memorable campers. We'd met him after he had climbed inside the dumpster and was tossing the contents onto the street. I yelled at him to stop. Allen asked what he was doing. He was looking for his laptop. The laptop was in a Bob Ross backpack. Bob Ross, the painter who talks about happy accidents. Malique's tent had been cleared when a cleanup crew came through. Allen climbed in with him, carefully moving the refuse without tossing it out. Malique was starting an insurance business; his customer files were on the computer. He'd paid off his debts but lost his apartment. His story unfolded as they went through the pile. Then Allen held up a purple pack emblazoned with Bob Ross's cheerful face. That was it! Malique was as happy as any human being I've ever seen. It was the best.

On the day they cleared the camp, I talked with this guy called Uncle. He was one of the last to leave. He left his things in our lot while he helped arrange a trailer for someone else. His own belongings fit neatly in a shopping cart: two propane bottles, a brown tarp, and a tent neatly folded. While we waited together, Uncle had explained the camp neighborhoods. Indigenous on the high ground toward the south; those from Somalia or Kenya lived in two groups on either side of the central space. The white drinkers down the path toward the stadium. Below the hill next to the freeway was "the barrens." That's where your stuff got thrown if you messed up in your section of the camp. Every group has people in the barrens, Uncle told me. I remember thinking that it was a shame to have learned this just as they were going. That I wished I had known more of their names and stories. I don't think that anymore. There's only so much bitter you need to savor.

It ended the same way many things end in this country: with a pointless act of violence. Adnan Mohamed Ali, 27, was murdered in the wee hours of Thursday morning, January 12, 2023. His photo shows a quizzical brow, a red well of sadness in his right eye, a beard grown out a little from its neat trim. Multiple gun shots, right near the spot where we watched the man be resuscitated and the stretcher leave empty. I study his face on the gun violence website. Was he one of the men who'd saved a life, or the one that needed saving? Was he the guy who sold drugs out of the porta-potty? I have no reason to believe that. He looked a little like that man I caught pissing on one of Allen's sculptures. But there's another part of that man that I can picture more clearly than his face. There's no other information about Mr. Ali on the page. Nothing on where, or whether, he worked, or who was in his family. I could check the record and see if charges were ever filed. Think I'll pass on that rabbit hole though. Too painful to write more. Why would you want to read this?

Adnan's death closed the camp. They brought the bulldozers in and filled thirty dump trucks with garbage. I kept watching for the hobbyhorse, but I didn't catch sight of it again. I think it came to symbolize the white horse I wanted to ride to the rescue. I had spent the night at the hospice listening to my mother's labored breath and returned just before they closed the street in front of the studio. After it was cleared, I went back to the hospice to sit with my mother's body. As she lay there stiffening and cooling, a slight smile came over her face. I waited until I could feel that she was gone, then called the funeral home and walked out with the stretcher. At the end, she looked happy, as if I had finally met with her full approval.

We were watchful for new campers at the House of Balls. Once, a single tent set up far down the walkway, where the drinkers had lived. I called the street intervention team. They came over to talk to the camper and the tent was gone by nightfall. It never was a good place for people to live. Whoever was there needed help. More help than either Allen or I could possibly offer.

In college I brought an old woman in for the night. I'd found her slumped in a doorway near my basement apartment off of M Street in Georgetown. "She's not your grandmother," my roommate said. "You can't adopt her like a pet." I passed that woman on the street a few times after that. Neither of us made eye contact.

When Melvin Broom came back the summer after the encampment, Allen barely recognized him. His gray hair was blond. He'd always wanted to be a blond, he said. Now he was. He had a partner and a place to live. Like any neighbor who moves away, it's good to know that things are working out for him.

Long after the camp was gone, the effects of the stress were apparent to both Allen and me. I was short tempered. I kept imagining my own house, beloved objects, and mementos disgorged into my backyard. How many dumpsters, dump trucks, or front loaders would it take to cart all this away? The camp kind of ruined me as a consumer, and probably also as a philanthropist.

There's a picture of my family in Medo Township. They're standing outside their home, a tidy frame structure with glass-paned windows. It's 1880. Pictured are three generations and a dog, tables, and chairs brought from inside. I know their names and something of their stories. The homestead stayed in the family for over half a century, then morphed into other farms and dairies, eventually portfolios, and tract homes, starter mansions, and coastal property in Florida. It morphed into my own beloved House of Balls.

One night, about six months after the camp was gone, in a hurry to leave, Allen left the front door unlocked and the "Open" sign on. It isn't like him to be absent-minded. The security cameras recorded a stream of visitors that night. Although they helped themselves to our beer, slept on the couches, and moved things around, nothing was taken or broken. It was almost as though the House of Balls had opened itself up, confident of its safety. Welcoming all who came, without suffering any real harm.