

## Houses in Motion

It started to rain.

TJ laid diagonally in the bed of his late 1990s GMC Sonoma extended cab. The pickup was once a bright red but had faded to a lighter shade over the decades. Rust chewed along the edges of the wheel-wells. A long, curved crack in the windshield stretched from one wiper to a spot just above the other. The pickup only had two doors, and to reach the area behind the seats, one of the seats needed to be slid forward. There were sideways jumps seats there, but they were closed and buried under TJ's belongings.

The rain wasn't entirely unexpected, although it was late coming. The sky turned cloudy early in the afternoon, but the rain TJ thought would begin around dusk failed to materialize. Still, he readied himself for inclement weather by lining the truck bed with a tarp and unrolling his sleepingbag on it. After getting in the bag, he flipped the tarp back over him so that he was sandwiched inside it. It wasn't cold, and he'd stay dry if the rain didn't get too bad.

TJ's stomach growled, and he tried to take his mind off it by thinking about his more important problems. Biggest of all was his truck. The Sonoma was fine for sleeping and holding his stuff, but to get a job he needed to get his truck running, especially since he wasn't much good for anything besides day work. For minor construction, landscaping, or handyman jobs, he needed the pickup to both get to the job and to perform it. If someone wanted some junk hauled to the dump for \$20, TJ needed the truck to get there and to haul the crap off.

The good news was that Lem thought he could get a new clutch cable for around \$50. Lem would do the work for him, too, on credit for a bottle or two of whiskey. Fifty bucks was doable eventually, but that was only if Lem diagnosed the problem correctly, and it wasn't a more serious transmission issue. If it was, he was fucked.

Lem lived in the cab-over camper directly behind TJ's pickup. The main bed over the cab was packed tight with Lem's belongings, and he slept on the bed converted from the dining table and bench seats. Like TJ, Lem was a vet – both Marines; unlike him, he poured most of his money into alcohol. TJ didn't judge. He needed his prescriptions to keep sane.

TJ was wounded in more ways than one in Fallujah. He suffered a TBI when the Humvee he was riding in was rocked by an IED. He took the medical discharge from the Corps after his discharge from the hospital. Twenty years later, he still suffered from blinding head pain and a serious case of PTSD. With meds, the pain was kept mostly at bay, as well as his tendency to explode into rages. Without them, life was difficult and finding work nearly impossible.

At one time, the VA helped him with all this. Then came more staff and program cuts. On his most recent sojourn to the VA, he literally waited all day to see someone only to be told there was a good chance there would no longer be financial assistance for his meds. The doc would still write his prescription, but now he might have to pay at the pharmacy. Since then, TJ was decided to ration his medications by taking them every other day. Obviously, the meds didn't work as well that way. The headaches came more frequently, and he had difficulty maintaining an even disposition.

Listening to the rain patter on the tarp, TJ decided he needed to focus on the truck. While he needed money for both, the truck led directly to jobs and cash for his meds. He needed to be careful, however. The docs had warned if he stopped one of the pills, it could lead to another psychotic break. He almost lost all of the little he had when he was briefly hospitalized last year and didn't want to risk that again.

He put his faith in Lem, *Semper Fi* and all that. Lem was stationed in Afghanistan, not Iraq, and ran a motor pool in Kabul. He didn't see the amount of action TJ had, but he saw enough that the experience left its mark. When fully in his cups, Lem would talk to TJ about a PFC under his

command whose head he watched explode when it was struck by a sniper's high-velocity bullet. TJ thought Lem might benefit from some meds like those he took, but he left Lem to his drug of choice: whiskey. Both men were on the other side of lectures and advice.

Given Lem's motor pool expertise, TJ felt good about his assessment of what ailed the Sonoma. Lem himself had said, however, there might be something more wrong with the transmission beyond the clutch cable – specifically, the clutch itself might need rebuilding. He wouldn't know for sure until he started work.

The patter of the rain on the tarp intensified. *Shit*, thought TJ, *I'm going to need to move inside*. He was ok with one wet night – if he could dry-out his sleepingbag the next day – but who knew how long this rain would last? A sleepingbag wet for days was something he did not wish to contemplate. He unzipped the bag, slid out and from beneath the tarp. Climbing stiffly out of the truck bed, he got his legs under him and quickly gathered up the bag, tossing it in the passenger side of the Sonoma. Before getting in himself, he did a fast fold of the tarp and stuffed it on the floor of the driver side.

Once inside the cab, he finished unzipping the bag all the way and gathered it around him like a blanket. His stomach growled. He considered drinking some water out of his two-liter jug to maybe quell the pangs but decided against it. He didn't want to risk more than necessary needing to scurry into the bushes to pee. Besides, he smiled, he might stumble over Stewart in the dark.

Everyone referred to Stewart as the Clam because whenever anyone asked him how he was doing, he always replied that he was “Happy as a clam.” (A typical conversation went, “How you doin’, Clam?” “Happy as a clam.”) Stewart had a thing for cardboard. He worked like a beaver constantly shoring up his cardboard “home” with newly found boxes dragged from area dumpsters. TJ knew that cardboard was an excellent insulator, but he doubted it did well in the rain. Stewart had built up so many layers, however, who really knew – besides Stewart – whether he got wet.

While Lem made his money and barter fixing vehicles, Stewart panhandled for his sustenance. He'd sit by the stoplight at the end of the nearby north-bound freeway exit ramp with a sign and a bucket. When the light turned red, Stewart would stand and work the trapped line of cars. Most drivers studiously avoided the slightest eye contact, but Stewart did ok in spite of his sign. Many similar signs read “Anything helps.” Stewart's sign, in all caps, read “NOTHING HELPS.” Stewart's needs weren't great. He got his cardboard for free, so his “donations” went to fast food, water – water was a constant struggle for everybody – and pens from the Dollar Store. Apparently, he spent his time inside his boxes writing on them. What he wrote, no one knew, but some rumored that it was one long sentence that stretched on for miles.

Lem's truck was the first in line of a few vehicles parked along the frontage road that ran parallel to the freeway. It was technically state property, but it wasn't clear which entity had enforcement authority, so everyone was mostly left alone. Next to Lem was a row of oleanders, under one of which was Stewart's boxes. The row of bushes quickly separated from the roadway, however, and by the time it reached Gloria's car in front of TJ, an open strip developed that marked the beginning of a tent encampment.

Of everyone TJ knew, Gloria and her son Tomas seemed to have the best shot at something better. They were evicted when their landlord doubled the rent. The sudden increase came when her lease came due, and the owner took such opportunities to displace tenants who did not fit his long-term business model. He was after higher income renters, so whenever he squeezed current renters out, he would refurbish the apartment with things like new fixtures, flooring, and appliances before putting it on the market.

Gloria was lucky. She still had a job (two in fact) and a bank account, as well as a post office box. Those latter things were important. The bank account gave her somewhere to deposit her paychecks from her room cleaning jobs at the Motel 6 and the Best Western. If she had to cash

those checks, she would have been forced to always carry all her savings with her in order to protect them from theft. The mailing address was also important and worth the \$120 a year. When the time came to fill out any paperwork, including any future rental applications, she had an actual address she could use.

Although she had more money to her name than most of the others in the encampment, she also had more expenses. Besides the po box, she obviously had two mouths to feed daily and had to cover the expense of before and after school care for Tomas until she got off work at the motel. She also paid for showers for the two of them every other day with day passes at the YWCA. She needed to get Tomas off the street, so every dollar she could save she put away toward a first and last month and security deposit for a new apartment. The longer getting enough savings took also meant the longer she'd go without having any rental history, which lowered the chances of finding a new home.

TJ looked at the back of Gloria's sedan through the rivulets of water worming down his windshield. He knew she and Tomas were in the first tent – the blue one – closest to the car. Her tent, as well as most of the others, was a hand-out from aid volunteers who came around occasionally to work the encampment. Once, TJ had taken a new jacket and gloves from them, along with some socks and underwear. The little bit helped. All of it did.

This was going to be a long, sleepless night. With the area behind the seats filled with his belongings, he couldn't recline his seat-back any. TJ would have to sit upright all night and stare straight ahead at nothing. The rain wasn't slackening, so he knew he'd made the right decision to get inside the Sonoma, even though it meant he'd likely do little more than doze until sunrise, then he'd be up. If the rain let up in the morning, he could walk the miles to the Home Depot and have a chance to get selected for work by contractors and others looking for a work crew.

If the rain stopped. If he got a job for a few days. If it was only the clutch cable that needed fixing. If he could afford his meds before he ran out entirely.

If.