

Flotsam

by Fabrizia Faustinella

The sky was darkening, crowded by black, ominous clouds blown by a forceful wind. Dust and leaves swirled in the air, waiting for the rain to ground them again. I could feel and smell the humidity from the Gulf. I almost could smell the sea. I certainly could hear the loud shrieks of the seagulls and saw several picking up trash in the desolated parking lot of the grocery store. The horizon was a brilliant crimson, spectacular and eerie. Was the sun setting in a large pool of blood? *Why do I think such stupid things? Vivid imagination or cognitive distortion? Forget it. I'd better hurry up.* The storm was coming.

I loaded the groceries in the trunk of the car and I drove away. Traffic was light. It felt strange to see the entire road ahead of me, almost deserted. I didn't want to be the only one out there when the storm hit and I tried to speed up a little. Nobody was waiting for me at home, and I wanted to get back before dark. I forgot to leave the lights on when I left, and I didn't look forward to the darkness of the driveway and backyard.

I had to stop at a red light. As the lid of a garbage container blew away in the wind, plastic bags, paper cups, empty cans, and all kind of debris were sent flying and skittering across the ground. Farther ahead, on the sidewalk, I saw a man in a wheelchair, alone. He struggled to move forward. He was one of the many homeless people who roam the streets of our city. It's hard enough to be homeless, but to be homeless and stuck in a wheelchair, how much harder can that get?

The traffic light turned green. I drove ahead and past him. The man was hunched over, face down, trying to negotiate the uneven sidewalk. The wheelchair was loaded with plastic bags overflowing with what were clearly all his worldly possessions.

I kept on driving while asking myself, *You are not going to leave this man stuck*

on the sidewalk with a big storm approaching, are you? Of course not. So I drove ahead until I found a place where I could safely turn around. I went back and found him in the same spot, not having progressed one inch I parked, got out of the car, and approached him. “Hi, sir, can I help you? Where are you trying to go?” There wasn’t much around, a hamburger joint, a gas station, a bus stop, and ...

“To that Luby’s Cafeteria, up there,” he said. “Could you find someone to push me?”

“Well, I’m here, sir. Nobody else is around. I don’t mind doing that.” The cafeteria was located on the top of a small hill. My city is totally flat and floods all the time. Maybe that’s why they built the cafeteria on an artificial hill. But now, what a challenge it would be to push a man in a wheelchair up there.

He was older, most likely mid-seventies, with curly, unkempt hair and a large black-and-gray beard. He wore paper scrubs, most likely given to him at the time of discharge from a local hospital. They were totally worn out, and the original blue color had faded away under layers of dirt and stains. He wore half-gloves, his fingers sticking out, revealing long, broken yellow nails. He had a strong smell of urine and old sweat. A roll of toilet paper had fallen out of one of the plastic bags, and I picked it up. The bags were on their last leg too, full of holes, ready to burst open at any time, their contents in serious jeopardy. Old food containers, boxes of crackers, diapers, bottles of water and soda, leaking and half empty, cups, plastic forks, pieces of paper with unreadable notes, and God only knows what else all crammed together and stuck to one another.

“I cannot believe I am in this situation and that I have to be pushed by a woman. I’m sorry, ma’am. This is not easy,” the man said as I was struggling to keep a straight path on the crooked sidewalk, which was littered with small branches fallen from the oak trees during the previous storm mixed with paper and plastic debris, some floating in puddles of water.

The wind didn’t help. It was adding weight and resistance to the wheelchair. I was concerned about engaging the uphill driveway of the cafeteria. *What if I couldn’t push his weight uphill and lost control of the wheelchair? What if it crashed and injured this poor man?* I started thinking of all sorts of disastrous scenarios. When I got there I pushed so very hard, summoning all my strength, my body at a forty-five-degree angle

on the slope. Amidst some puffing and grunting, I finally got to the top. I guess all the gym visits and weight lifting had paid off. I seemed stronger than what I thought.

“I can’t go inside, ma’am. My personal hygiene is very poor. I wouldn’t dare go into a restaurant like this.”

“I can go in. What would you like to eat?”

“I have a Luby’s card, ma’am. Let me look for it.”

“Don’t worry about it. Save the card, sir. I can go in and get you something,” I said with a slight urgency in my voice, as it was getting late.

“Don’t rush me, please. You see, people are impatient. Don’t rush me. I’ll find the card.” He pulled out three different wallets from various pockets of a black jacket. The wallets were bursting with receipts, business cards, pieces of paper meticulously folded, stickers, remnants of a life of struggles. As he sorted through them, uttering words of dismay at not being able to find his precious Luby’s card, he and became increasingly frustrated. I waited, suspended, wondering how long this would take, thinking of what to do, until I said in a calm, soothing voice, “Well, while you look for the card, why don’t I go inside? Please, just tell me what you would like to eat and I’ll be glad to get it for you.”

“Rice and gravy, lima beans, and three cornbread muffins.”

“What about some meat or fish?”

“No, that’ll be enough. Rice and gravy, lima beans, and three cornbread muffins.”

I insisted on getting something else as well, and he eventually asked for meat loaf, most likely one of the few meat preparations his poor dentition would have allowed him to eat, and a cup of ice.

I went inside. No line at the counter. I ordered the food. No meat loaf was available. I decided to get chicken. I hoped it was okay with him. I got the cup of ice, paid, and stepped outside.

“Here is the food, sir, but they didn’t have meat loaf, so I got you chicken.”

“That’s okay, thank you. I’m sorry I was impatient with you. You’re the only one who has helped me. We get so frustrated by our predicament that we end up taking our frustration out on the people who are there for us. I also apologize to you for smelling so bad. I apologize for being in your presence in such a state of disrepair,” he said with

shame in his voice, shaking his head, barely looking up at me. We heard laughter coming from inside the cafeteria.

“You see, people laugh, and they move on with their lives. They laugh and they’re busy and have no compassion. That’s why I stopped going to church a long time ago. I realized that people go to church and say they believe in God, but then they have no compassion. So what good does it do, going to church like that and having no compassion?”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Jimmy. My name is Jimmy.”

“Jimmy, how did you get in this situation?”

“I don’t want to talk about that now,” he said with pain and a hint of resentment in his voice, “but I ask the Lord: what have I done to deserve this? I have robbed no banks, I haven’t used no drugs, I haven’t stolen from people, I haven’t killed anybody, and here I am. Why am I being punished like this, Lord? Lord, help me! I’ve been a good man, help me!” He lowered his head even more, saliva drooling out of his mouth, dripping on the paper scrubs.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I’m sorry...”

“No need to be, sir. I am sorry for you. This is a terrible situation.”

“It sure is terrible, ma’am.”

I patted him on his shoulder. “Should I push you there?” I pointed at a sheltered place on the side of the cafeteria where he could eat and maybe spend the night.

“No,” he answered, “I’d like to stay here a little longer.”

“But, sir, how did you even get on that sidewalk?” I blurted out, bewildered that anybody could get around in his condition and manage to survive. “I mean, where are you coming from? Where were you before? I’ve never seen you on this side of town. Who are you?”

“Don’t worry about it. I am ... flotsam ... just flotsam.”

Flotsam? What did that mean? I’d never heard that word before. I didn’t know the meaning of it, but I didn’t dare ask.

It was definitely late now and dark, streetlamps casting an uncertain yellow light on the street. It was starting to rain. I said, “I’m going now. I’ll be thinking of you, Jimmy.

I wish I could do more for you.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said.

I headed back to the car, my hair scrambled by the wind, raindrops falling on my face. I drove home. As expected, my backyard was very dark, but not as dark as my thoughts and my heart. I opened the door, stepped inside, and felt guilt at the comfort of my home. I decided to burn a candle for Jimmy, but what good was that going to do? I did it anyway, still hoping the prayer would somehow help. Maybe it would help me more than Jimmy. It would help me to accept the intrinsic and inescapable unfairness of life, which no thought process has ever been able to reconcile in my mind.

Then I sat at the computer to search for the meaning of “flotsam.” This is what I found: 1. floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo; floating debris washed up by the tide; 2. a floating population as of emigrants or castaways; 3. miscellaneous or unimportant material.

Human flotsam. That’s what he thought of himself. The wreckage of a life, the product of a broken existence, fallen into pieces that could not be glued together any longer and made whole again.



Fabrizia Faustinella is a physician and filmmaker. She grew up in Italy and moved to the United States where she practices as an internist in the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas. Caring for the undeserved and the homeless has inspired her to write about her experiences in several patient-centered essays which have been published in academic and literary journals alike. She recently wrote, directed and produced *The Dark Side of the Moon*, a film-documentary about the root causes of homelessness and the hardship of street life.