

As Usual...

By Deb Stipp

As usual, on a Saturday evening in the Chicago Loop – the area full of shops, department stores, museums, restaurants, bars and theatres – the streets bustle with a cadre of people. People carry cases – suit cases, briefcases, art portfolio cases, musical instrument cases march along the ribbons of concrete. Though the sky's crisp and clear blue, the mountains of skyscrapers shadow the sunlight from the streets, the wind and chill swirl into the canyon valleys.

As usual, clickity-clack, clickity-clack, sque-e-e-ak, ROAR....the "L" train above slowly makes its turn south to Wabash from Lake Street. Its looming shadow casts down on the collection of folks gathered to listen to five young, black men rhythmically drumming on white five-gallon buckets. Across the street, in front of the deli amidst smells of freshly baked yeast breads, the sax, trumpet, bass and guitar from the jazz quartet jam to Coltrane and Miles Davis –hoping the gathered crowd fills their over-turned black hat with appreciative dollars for this evening's work.

As usual, people scurry about carrying shopping bags full of bargains or souvenirs of trinkets or Garrett's popcorn from a day in the city. Tourists, gently meander their way from building to building gazing skyward more than watching their path. Junior photogs with cell phones attached to selfie sticks, or Point and Shoot cameras click away at the city sights. Silver haired, suit jacketed, silk tied men with their fur-coated ladies deliver their cars to valets outside the Hyatt – a placard on the sidewalk easel reads "Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction Tonight – Chicago Coalition for the Homeless."

As usual, gaggles of eyebrow pierced, ear gaged, mohawked blue-green hair, tatted teens adorned in colorful shirts and ripped jeans wander aimlessly down the sidewalks occasionally chase a begging pigeon – chattering, cursing, and blasting music as they go. The musky stench of marijuana and sweat mingle with the sweet scent of Mrs. Field's cookies blend

in a pungent aroma as they pass by. Bending over near a short hedge, a couple of men curiously examine a credit card lost on the street. One photographs the card front and back while the other tugs at his jeans pocket. Giggling they trot off to gather with another friend standing in a popcorn line on the next block.

As usual, around the corner, the bright white marque lights run around the edge of the sign proudly announcing “SOLD OUT CONCERT”. Next to the theatre, a black man in his out-of-trend Sunday suit barks out warnings: “Ya’ll never get to heaven with yo’ evil ways. Come over here and I’ll tell ya how to get some JE-Sus.”

As usual, a shiny, black stretch limo parks in the middle of State Street and eight women, identically dressed in purplish-gray satin strapless gowns carefully leave the warmth of the coach. Eight tuxedoed groomsmen obediently follow. All stand in formation clustering around the stars of the event – the bride and groom. The bride’s brilliant white satin and lace ball gown with a cathedral train flaps flag-like in the “hawk” of a wind. Her brown hair, shiny and clean coiffed to perfection in a romantic braided up-do with pink and white roses and sprigs of seed pearls woven into it for a lace-like appearance. The strong, protective groom sports a Calvin Klein charcoal grey tuxedo with vest and stands proudly holding close his new bride. Hired photographers snap frame after frame of the couple and their wedding party with the theatre as a backdrop and then turning towards Marina City Towers before heading back into the limo for their next destination.

As usual, around the corner across from Macy’s, on this noisy city street with trotting horse-drawn carriages, honking taxies, racing buses with engines spewing clouds of exhaust, there is an old woman. Her gray, wiry hair, dirty and dry, blows over her wrinkled, weathered face. She dons a tattered wool coat – full of the soot of the streets, pieces of frayed cloth, the third button missing, a pocket half torn away. Her gloves, one brown, the other green, partially cover her cracked hands – a long string dangling from her left thumb, the worn yarn unraveling. Stained blue over-sized trousers cover her legs. Her thin-soled brown shoes are dusty and partially held together with gray tape.

As usual, this is her spot - two concrete slabs against the building that is home to the Joffrey Ballet studios. She struggles against gusts of wind while preparing her mattress – an opened newspaper four pages, two sheets that she spreads onto the frigid sidewalk. Her crooked arm acts as her pillow and a moth-eaten gritty portion of cloth her blanket. Next to her feet in the corner of the wall sits her entire world in a rusty two-wheeled cart: a half-eaten ham sandwich, a small paper cup stained with coffee, several pieces of newspaper, three paper bags, a wadded ball of unwashed clothes, one boot, a pair of red socks with only one small hole - treasures she’s scavenged from street dumpsters outside nearby hotels and high-rises.

As usual, when the night darkens, the city settles down. Theatre goers chatter by, their heels clomping as they rush to the parking garage. Shoppers with crackly bags full of goods stand at bus stops. Drunks loud with boisterous laughter stagger by, and the occasional group of raucous sports fans clamor as they run to catch their trains. A plethora of sidewalk visitors pass by the old woman’s concrete slab of a nest yet no one notices that she is curled up on the sidewalk. Does anyone wonder: Who is this old woman? Why is she alone? Where is her family? Do they think about her? Do they miss her?

As usual, isolated, in the outdoor night, on the street, she is protected only by her raggedy blanket. No one checks on her, except the cop on his beat who taps her with his night stick, another lost soul who rummages through her treasures, and a wandering rat that sniffs for food.

As usual...

The End

Deb Stipp bio: Northwest Indiana resident, Deb Stipp teaches psychology at a community college. While in college, she won 2nd place for her essay "Too Much TP, but No Eggs" in the Sigrid Stark Writing contest sponsored by Purdue University Calumet. Professor Charlie Tinkham encouraged her creative writing.