

Robert – of no fixed address

A short story by Mike Dickson

I've had an interesting life, so it only came as a slight surprise what happened today.

I was looking for a place to sit in the sun and have a coffee. Today is definitely one of the last semi-warm days to be able to do this in Vancouver. Soon, the rain will start and the temperature will drop down to seven or eight degrees celcius, and close to three to four overnight, on average. Basically, we get the same weather as Seattle does, if that means anything.

I went over to Starbucks, which was the best place that would serve the purpose for today. Normally, I will go to any other coffee shop - just a personal taste on coffee. Today, however, they get my business because of the perfect outdoor seating.

I had only been sitting for a few minutes, when I glanced over to the table next to me, and noticed a man who was working away writing something. I could tell that he was probably homeless, or at least quite down on his luck. I say this, not just because of his scruffy appearance, but his cart/buggy that was parked next to him, a few feet away. Just as I brought my glance back to my cell phone, the man asked me if I knew how to spell something. I asked him what the word was again, as I had not heard it clearly.

"Tether," he responded .

"Hmmmmm," I replied, "I'm pretty sure it's T,E,T,H,E,R."

He asked if I was sure, and I said that I was pretty sure. Interesting word, I thought. I did have to think about the spelling for a second, being that it was not a word I can ever recall writing.

We then chatted for a few minutes about what he was writing. He was open enough to tell me that it was a poem for a friend. This friend of his had asked him to write it for her birthday. " No pressure," he said a couple of times, telling me that it was just today that she had asked him if he would do this. We continued to talk for a couple more minutes.

He continued writing, and I sipped on my coffee, while enjoying the last bit of warm sun for the year. As you might guess, I enjoy writing, so I was impressed that he was doing this. Creativity in any form has begun to impress and influence me more over the last 15 years or so.

As I leaned back in my chair, Robert, it turns out his name was, asked me if I'd like to read something that he had written. I guess he could tell that I was open to this, from my reaction to the fact that he was writing a poem. The truth was that I had been tempted to ask if I could read what he was writing, as it appeared he may have been finished. It was a duotang-type folder that he handed me. It was in perfect shape, which I thought was pretty neat, considering what were probably his living conditions.

The story he had written was about his time on a fishing boat, off the west coast of British Columbia. It detailed, in a humour-filled way, a few days spent with the owner of the boat. At the end of the nine pages, it turns out that he caught a full grown goat in his net. It was a decent read, and showed that he was a good writer, and could tell an interesting story.

By now, Robert had moved over to my table, and was sitting across from me. We continued to chat for probably another 30-40 minutes. He told me a little about about how he had lost his job,

and lost his house in Ontario. He said that he had "Had it all," and then "Bang" (as he put it), within one year, everything had changed. Now his house was the doorway in an alley, a few blocks away from where we were sitting. It is funny how much things can change, I thought to myself. "Funny" would definitely not be the right word here - "Sad, or "Terrible" is probably more appropriate. It also made me think to myself how lucky I am to have the parents I have, and friends that I do. I could be in his shoes, if things hadn't worked out Okay for me.

It also made me think of all the people in the U.S that have lost their homes in the last few years, and what has become of them. How many of them are just hanging on to what they have, including their sanity?

Robert referred to himself earlier in the conversation as a crazy old guy, though it was hard to tell how serious he was. He seemed quite normal to me, or as normal as could be expected in his situation. He seemed to be hanging on, anyway. I did my undergraduate degree in Psychology, so I was aware of some of the conditions that he could be suffering from. I had also heard a statistic that somewhere around 70% of the homeless are mentally ill. Who was to say how long this guy could hold on for?

Robert told me that he had had a place to live up until two years ago. He was living at his best friend's shop, just a few blocks from where we were sitting. I couldn't help but ask what happened. He told me that there was a fire at his friend's place, and that he was lucky to make it out alive. His friend, it turns out, wasn't so lucky.

What the hell had this guy done to deserve this, I thought. Probably nothing, was most likely the answer. Whoever said that

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