

Vagabonding Experiences

The Bittersweet Freedom of Homelessness

THE FREEDOM OF HOMELESSNESS

by Miriam Korn

Recently, I was talking to a guy who called himself "Hobo". He was not a vagrant. He had identification and five dollars in his pocket. No one was really homeless, he said. Everyone had to have a home at some time. They had to start somewhere

Our conversation rambled on for quite a while, for despite my comfy condition of middle-class suburban family stability, I found I could relate to this man, an ex-shipyard worker. "Down and out and needing a helping hand" was his self-description.

I recalled scenes from my own roving when I had felt hopelessly alone, but noted that I had had the luxury of choosing this homeless lifestyle. My condition could have always been ameliorated by one simple act: a call home.

In retrospect, I am reminded of a certain chronic wanderer I encountered in my travels. He was a sunny young Parisian, met one golden afternoon on a hillside in Aix-les-Bains, a picturesque village nestled in the Alps of southern France.

He awoke, grateful to feel the sun's warmth beating on his face, not the cold drizzle of the night before. His sleeping bag still felt uncomfortably clammy, like an incubator for mold.

He darted a look to his left, upon the awareness of his consciousness. The day had begun. Reality recommenced.

His glance confirmed the bag was still sitting next to him, calming his initial panic. Everything he owned was in that purple and green sac. He had worked long hours dishwashing in Cannes for many of these clothes. The rest were rightfully stolen at the same time he had acquired their flashy container. He liked all the bright T-shirts he had inside, all clean and ready to wear for a special occasion. If only he had a lock. The contents would be safer.

He climbed out of his rudimentary bed clothes and surveyed his surroundings. The setting had been a mystery last night when he got off the train—the conductor had checked for tickets early, and thus he did not have a chance to slither into the lavatory during the rounds. The little French town across the river looked welcoming. He could go across and knock on a few doors. There would surely be enough friendly people to provide breakfast. Perhaps he could find some cigarettes, too.

He put on his black shoes, rolled up his sleeping bag and placed it carefully into his bright sac. The sores on his hand, much like those on the back of his ear, hurt as he grabbed the zipper to close it again.

His big grey turtleneck, black jacket and tattered jeans were rumpled and damp. They were dirty, but he did not mind. He liked them. Clothes are very important to the French.

Sometimes he thought of calling home, but Maman would just cry if she heard his voice. Besides, his father did not want him there. He had done some bad things. Yet, four years is a long time.

Perhaps someday he could return to Paris, and later join his brother in Texas. The United States is a very nice place . . . free, clean and comfortable: easy.

He stood up to take in the view once again. The warm breeze rippled his clothing. He noted the gentle flow of the river under the bridge, calming any distress he may have felt earlier.

A short smiling sigh interrupted his breath. He picked up his sac, slung it over his shoulder, and headed downstream. It was another day.

I learned a lot from traveling with someone who travelled for a living. One would think his familiarity with the French railway system would have been especially helpful. In fact, however, train travel was a nightmare with him, for he was unaccustomed to finding information before boarding a train. In the past, his destination had for the most part been irrelevant. All that mattered was he was in a warm dry car going somewhere else... away.

The preservation of dignity in his determination to survive was both remarkable and admirable. He ate voraciously when food was available, but was very methodical when drinking his espresso, carefully unwrapping the sugar cubes, dropping each one in his cup and slowly stirring the coffee with the little spoon to assure the sweetener's dissolution.

Un café est sacré.

