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Women and Children

THERE WERE WOMEN at the Las Vegas Rescue Mission, but we mostly saw them from a distance. The housing for mothers with children was across the basketball court from the patio outside the men's dormitory where we lingered between 4:00 p.m. check-in and dinner at 5:00, and between the end of dinner and 7:00 chapel. There were little fenced yards outside the mothers' housing where the kids would run around in the dusk after supper, which was a nice thing to watch. But we weren't allowed to cross the yard to get closer, and the yellow-shirted security guards were on high alert when the kids were out. The women without children lived in another dormitory across a road that ran through the middle of the shelter's property, so our only chance to be close to any of them was during chapel or at dinner, and maybe, out of habit or because of shyness, we didn't tend to approach them even there.

I wrote this story to read at a cultural event at the local university. The event's theme was "Inspiring Women Among Us," a subject that left me spoiled for choice given how many women have inspired me in one way or another from my mother and grandmother, to teachers and professors, to actresses, singers, and writers like Plath and Didion. But the story I ended up writing wasn't about any of these women. Instead I recounted a month I spent, during an American road trip in the fall of 2012, living in and around a homeless shelter called the Rescue Mission, in Las Vegas, about four kilometres north of the familiar canyon of casinos that is the Strip. When I sat down to write something about the women in my life, nothing seemed so relevant as that month in the shelter where women and men led lives that paralleled one another without much convergence. It's unsurprising, perhaps, that life in a homeless shelter in America's most decadent city comes with attendant pains, but the pain that came with the separation of the sexes was something I hadn't anticipated when I checked myself in. It was painful because it invited grim reflection on what it means to be male. It was painful because having only ourselves was not enough and we missed the women terribly.

Our world was entirely male but without the kinetic vitality found in other male places. At the time, I carried a little paperback copy of *Men without Women* by Ernest Hemingway around in my back pocket. In it there's a story about a boxer and another about a matador, and they both fight things bigger and more frightening than themselves and wind up losing. But the losing isn't the important bit, and in the two stories there is a nice way in which it all seems in service of some larger important thing. I could read them and nod and say something to myself like "Well that's how it is," and be all right with the way the boxer winds up all busted up and bloody. I'd think about the boxer and then look around and consider the objectiveless nature of our day to day. It was evident in one way with the young men and in another with the old. The young had that pacing, knee-bouncing, chain-smoking tension that makes everyone around them nervous. The old had a lethargy that could drag you down from all the way across a room, if you let it. An interesting thing was to watch an old man sit next to a young man and see who infected whom.

The whole painful aesthetic came together in the showers. Each day, after we'd been breathalysed and checked in, security would send us to a counter near the washroom where they would search our bags, removing things like mouthwash and toenail clippers, and then give us a bar of soap, shampoo, and a towel, and instruct us to bring back the empty shampoo bottle and soap wrapper to prove we washed. All body types packed into a cavernous tiled room that smelled of disinfectant and steam. Black and white and brown. Fat and thin. Bodies covered in coarse whirls of animal hair. Bodies with scars or sores on backs or, like stigmata, on wrists and hands. Bodies with arms inflated from years in penitentiary weight rooms. Bodies in all manner of stance and posture. Feet planted either side of the drain at the room's centre, one hand working a lather into the groin. Leaning beneath the showerhead with one forearm resting on the wall, forehead resting on forearm, and the other hand hanging limp by the side. The swaybacked posture of obese men at ease staring blankly at the expanse of tile between showerhead and temperature dial. Standing there, letting the hot water run over me, down my chest, down my arms, to run in little rivulets off the tips of my fingers. Upending half the shampoo into my palms and the rest down the drain. Aware grotesquely, and not without a sense of absurdity, of all that impotent flaccidity dangling in my periphery. No one looking directly at anyone else.

The women were always in chapel ahead of us. They sat on the right side of the central aisle; we sat on the left. There was no rule on this, but it's the way it was. They smiled more than we did, and at first I thought this must be because they were closer to one another than

we were. With the men, talking was like passing messages between walled cities. There was good will and agreement, but no unity. The women looked like they were more together. But then we learned to talk to the security guards who told us about fights in the women's dormitory; and girls showed up to chapel with hair missing and faces swelled up like catcher's mitts; and I started to think that maybe we were more together than they were, or else maybe loneliness looked different in them than it did in us.

In chapel the preachers taught us that God suspects us all equally but in different ways, and though we all sin differently we all nonetheless sin. The congregation nodded along and the guilt settled in like fog. The assumed guilt explained a lot of things: the searches at the gate, the mandatory showers, the bunk inspections, the separation of men and women. Yet it was guilt that married us together too. The closest I ever felt to the women was when service was over and we all filed out together, walking the short hallway from the chapel to the parking lot where we went our separate ways. All of us guilty together, shuffling our way back to our dormitories through the desert night.

The specific presumption that kept us apart was the presumption of lust, and it applied to both sexes. But with the males there was something else as well: a presumed threat. Thus the security guards standing between us and the women with children in the evenings. It felt unjust but it was hard to feel outraged when we knew that among us numbered convicted sex offenders and pedophiles. I'd look at the security guards and feel the danger implied by my own body, as if, somehow without knowing it, I'd been a weapon all along. It made it hard to look a woman in her eye for fear that doing so might pull some hidden trigger inside me that couldn't be unpulled.

We were kept apart, but needless to say our lust did not abate through separation. On our side lust looked like men standing awkwardly in the shower, hands trying to cover half erections until they could will themselves limp. It looked like men padding to the bathroom in the middle of the night to masturbate as quietly as possible in the echoing stalls. It sounded like the inarticulate moans of lurid dreamers at 2:00 a.m. It looked like abashed glances across the aisle in chapel, which sometimes got returned, which is all I can say about how lust looked on their side.

Lust on our side didn't look like actual sex, not in the shelter. It could have, but as a group we couldn't be counted on to keep that kind of thing to ourselves. Our unspoken pact to cover for one another pretty much maxed out at nocturnal emission, and there was nowhere to go where parties not directly involved couldn't hear or see. Another wordless consensus kept the two suspected homosexuals on the social

outskirts through another wordless consensus, and the preacher reminded us daily of the relevant eternal penalties. And once there was a woman who got up in chapel and went on a ten-minute rant about how she had once lusted after another woman but had been saved by coming over to Jesus. And as she spoke people got up and shouted for her to “Preach!” and “Go on Sister!” And there was a big security guard at the back of the chapel who had his hands out wide in a big ‘v,’ with a breathalyzer dangling from each wrist. And the women started to chant that God was “Love! Love! Love!” and damn near everyone got to their feet with hands outstretched or held prayer-wise in front of their hearts to sway in time with her chanting. “Love! Love! Love!” Everyone except me and one of the suspected homosexuals and two or three women across the aisle who sat awkwardly until it was over.

The assumed guilt was what kept the men separated from the children as well, but there were children on our side, anyway, of a sort. There were infants who came in the form of men. Men who had managed—either through chemical erosion or to retreat from unknown pains—to recede far enough within themselves that their bodies hardly concerned them anymore. Fifty-year-olds with grey beards who needed one of the volunteers to cut their food at mealtimes. Men who lay on the sidewalk outside the shelter gates between the time they kicked us out at 6:30 in the morning, and took us back in at 4:00 in the afternoon. Lying on the pavement all day in the hundred-degree heat. Men who fell asleep in chapel with their heads on their chests, awakening suddenly and bleating out like children in a darkened theater.

And there were some who only just avoided being children by definition. One boy in particular I knew. A thin feral teen who said he was either Inuit or Eskimo depending on the day you asked him. Sometimes men would stop their cars as we walked in the street and ask him to get in for a hundred dollars, and the boy would say no, but after they left he’d tell me “If you weren’t here, I would have said yes.” But I don’t think that was true. He got his money selling blood plasma, which is maybe why he was so pale and thin. And one day a man lured him into a storage locker down near Main and Charleston Ave and raped him, and the boy told me about it later in the vacant lot next to Main Street Casino. He was sniffing and crying as he told me, and then, to make an excuse for the sniffing, he said that he did a lot of coke, which wasn’t true either. I don’t think he even drank. The casino’s sign blinked away behind the kid’s head. There was an overpass and cars went by, and the noise of their passage overhead echoed between the steel girders.

There's a story in *Men without Women* called "In Another Country" that starts: "In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more." I like that line a lot. It's about soldiers wounded in a war and how the war goes on without them. In the story the soldiers go to a hospital everyday where they are hooked up to machines that are supposed to heal their wounds. But the machines have never healed anyone: the soldiers are the first test group. The doctors apply the machines with great diligence and optimism. But everyone pretty much knows that the machines won't work and even if they did there are other things wrong with the soldiers that no doctor will ever heal.

Sometimes during the day a few of us younger men would walk the four kilometers down to the Strip and up the canyon of casinos and go into the stores and watch the tourists move in streams down the sidewalks. We were like ghosts passing down the long aisles of slots, padding the marble corridors, being told by security to move along. In the afternoon we'd walk home and hit the showers and I'd think about the soldiers in Hemingway's story. I'd listen to the preacher in the chapel talk about how we could still be saved if only we could really give ourselves to Jesus. I'd listen to the congregation chant that God was "Love! Love! Love!" like the pneumatic pulse of a machine. I'd look across the aisle at the women and feel ashamed. Love. Love. Love. The Inuit kid slept with his knees curled up to his chest two bunks over and no mother ever found him there, or held him, or smoothed his hair, or whispered it would all be okay.