

# Cardboard boxes

by Susan Hanna Frook

She is sleeping under a bridge. She says this so casually, like, "the sky is so blue." My heart drops. It's no big deal, she advises me. We have a big box and we covered it with plastic and we have blankets to keep warm. I wanted to grab her and shake her and tell her how crazy the things she was saying sounded to me; but I couldn't.

She was 42-years-old. She is my daughter. And, on that night while I slept in my warm bed ... or at least tried to sleep ... she would be sleeping under a bridge in a cardboard box.

In the weeks that followed, I got a first-hand look at what it was like to be homeless in her world. My only contact with her was through irregular cell phone calls that come like lifelines to my shattered mind, letting me know she was still ok. Most often they were calls to meet to drink a warm cup of coffee and touch hands while she told me about her life. When I would find her, waiting on the corner of some street, she would be bundled in multiple jackets and socks and mittens looking brave in the bright sunshine. The weather was still bearable at night and she felt confident that she could survive just fine in her box under the bridge. I was terrified for her.

One day I found her with a fellow below-the-bridge dweller. He was walking her around town while her husband was off doing some task. He was dirty and ragged and his nose was running. But, she told me, he was keeping her safe. Seems that living in her box had begun to be a little frightening at night. "People just show up, pulling the blankets apart, and move in to keep warm. "If you don't group together, they will take your box and all your things and leave you in the cold." So, she now had a short, bedraggled bodyguard who followed her like a shadow wherever she went, keeping her safe. For how long, I remember wondering to myself.

Her friend had shown her all the places she could go to get warm meals and warm clothes. And, she was excited as she had a stock of canned goods and packaged food stored in her box to keep her from going hungry. She had no way to cook anything, but, it made her feel good to have it there. And, she told me of the people who came and stopped under the bridge to hand out blankets and warm clothing to those living there. It helped, because nothing is safe in a box house. And, it was getting colder and darker out under that bridge. I thought about that. A lot.

As the weather continued to grow colder, her smile faded a little more each time I saw her. Her calls were more desperate and now were coming mostly at night. She was afraid. The box wasn't keeping her safe from the night and the night visitors it brought. And, the cold was seeping in, past the plastic and blankets and even huddling close with her husband under multiple blankets wearing multiple coats couldn't keep out the icy wind. One night she called for me to come to bring her something warm to drink. It was pitch dark and the wind was howling and I dreaded going under that bridge. But, I knew I would go. "Momma", she said, "don't stop under that bridge. Drive beyond and I will be waiting. It's not safe for you there in the dark so do not stop there."

bridge ... in a box ... a stupid, fragile cardboard box.

When I approached the bridge it was pitch dark. As I eased under that bridge I searched the blackness there, desperately looking for her. My headlights caught her in the road ahead, waving me on. When I stopped, she grabbed the door open and scooped in, slamming and locking the door behind her. "Drive, Momma," she almost shouted, "Now!" I did, wondering what nightmare we were leaving in the darkness behind us.

She smelled like wet blankets and dirty socks. But, she was alive, and she was with me. And, for that moment, it was all that mattered.

I drove forward in the night as she sipped the hot coffee I had brought her. She was quiet and a thousand questions begged answers. But, I waited, remaining silent.

Finally, as she shivered in the seat beside me, I once again begged her to come home with me, to get some help, to find her way back from where she had gone. I reminded her of her children, and of the life she had left behind; of the good days and good times yet to be had if she would just get help. "I will, Momma," she whispered, "I promise."

After she was warm we went back to that bridge; she was ready to face the box again. Try as I might, I didn't win the battle that night. But, I didn't give up. Not then. Not ever.

It took her another few months to leave that box. And, the end of the journey, though unpleasant, was the beginning of a new life. She is in the process of healing and I finally dare to breathe with hope in my heart.

But, not all the stories end this way. The little man who followed her to keep her safe is still living under bridges and in boxes and anywhere he can find a place to rest. There is no one to keep him safe, no one who cares, yet he survives.

The boxes are gone from under the bridge. For a while, after my daughter left that place, a few old coats and small containers were strewn around as silent reminders of the desperate souls that had shared that space.

But, she isn't there. Her box isn't there. I thank God for that.

All over cities across this nation there are stories like this to be told. Those who live in boxes and under bridges and in all those lonely places the homeless go have their reasons for being there. ("There, but for the grace of God, go I") I am forever thankful for everyone who took the time to drop off a blanket or give a warm coat to my daughter during her time under that bridge. You kept her warm when I couldn't. You didn't see a skinny, bedraggled, torn face in a crowd of so many like her, you saw her need and you met it with kindness. You are part of the reason she made it out of that cold box alive.

So, as the holiday season approaches, and the cold winds blow, may we each look for ways to reach out to those in need. And, in the words of Tiny Tim, let us be able to say, "God bless us, every one!"

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