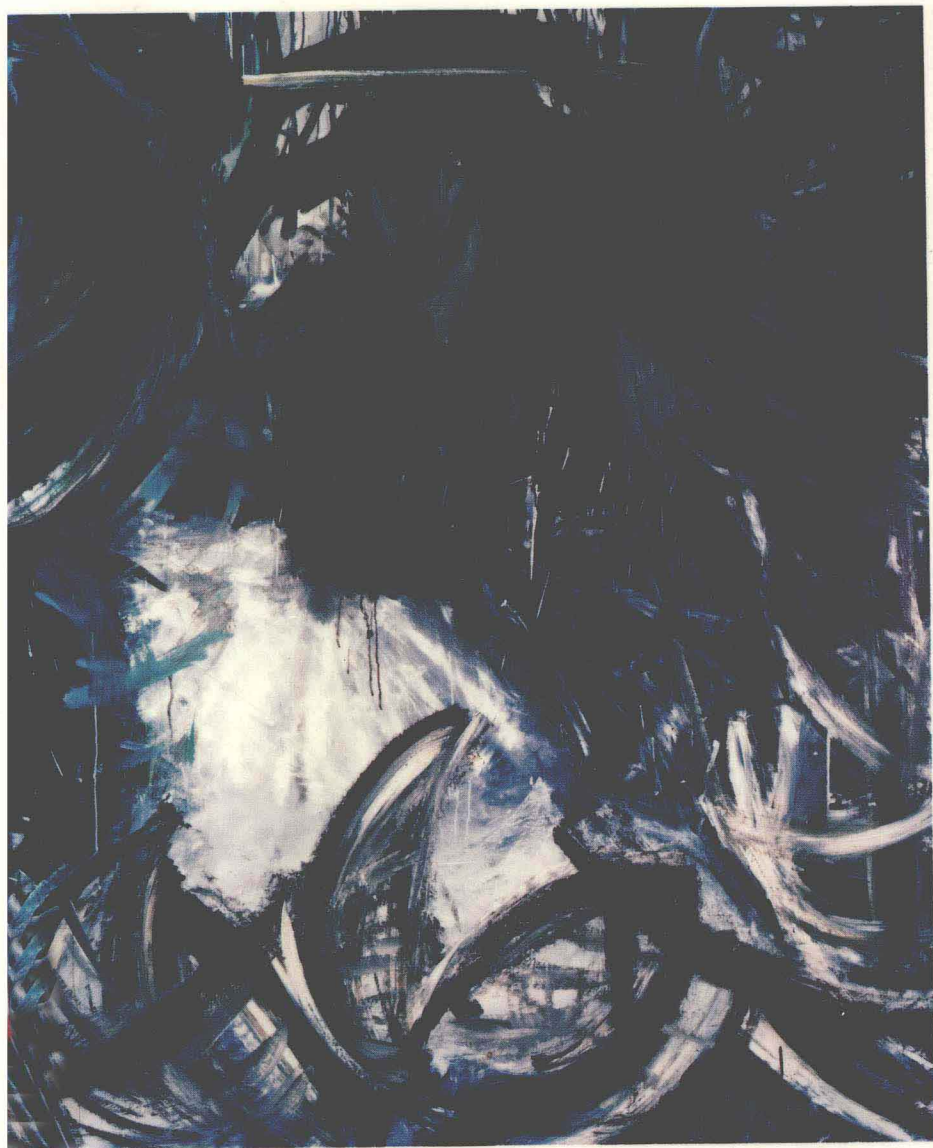


SISTERS OF THE SHADOW



By Maxine Harris

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MAXINE HARRIS

Chevy Chase, Maryland

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Part One

Homeless Women and the Shadow

Chapter 1

Homeless Women and Non-homeless Women:

An Introduction to the Issues

One evening as I was visiting with several friends, the conversation turned to the predicament of homeless women. Washington, D.C., like many other large urban centers, has a highly visible and heterogeneous population of homeless men and women. The homeless population had been receiving media attention because, in an effort to prevent these people from using the city's subway stations as temporary residences, the mayor had decided to close the entrances leading to the subways each evening.

The mayor's decision had received mixed reviews within the city, and it also received mixed reactions from my friends that evening in my home. One woman acknowledged, somewhat timidly, that she was horrified by the sight of homeless people, especially disheveled, homeless, psychotic looking women. She confessed that she had such a strong, visceral reaction to the sight of these deranged and lost souls that she actually took a circuitous

route to work to avoid passing groups of homeless women congregating in front of a soup kitchen. While she was somewhat embarrassed to acknowledge her reaction, my friend was clearly uncomfortable and unnerved at the thought of having to encounter these unfortunate women.

Another woman was less tentative in her reaction. She was enraged at the sight of homeless people on the city streets. She asserted that she paid her taxes, that she deserved to live in a pleasant environment, and that if she wanted to see poverty and despair, she would rather see it at the movies where she could control the distance between herself and the images on the screen. She felt that she had a right not to be bombarded on her way to work by people whom she found repugnant and intrusive.

A third woman, who leads a somewhat nontraditional life-style, was appalled at the reactions of the other two. She felt that not only did homeless women have a right to be on the streets, but that those of us who were more economically fortunate had a moral obligation to acknowledge them, to see them, and to find some way to relate to them. She believed that, above all else, we should not be allowed to deny the existence of these less fortunate and less socially acceptable women.

As I listened to the conversation, I was struck by two things. First, it was predominantly the women among my group of friends who felt compelled to talk about this subject. Although there were occasional comments by the male members of the group, the men seemed less touched by and less involved in the problems of homeless women. I do not think that they were any less caring or any less socially concerned than the women in the group, but, the presence of homeless, disturbed women was not as alive and unsettling for the men as it was for the women.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I was impressed by the passion with which these women expressed their opinions. There was vehemence to their words. These were not merely intellectual opinions, these were deeply felt emotional reactions. What started as a discussion turned into a debate, and by the time the evening ended, these women were literally screaming their different opinions at one another.

Such intense reactions are not limited to my group of friends; they are echoed throughout our country by civic leaders, journal-

ists, and average citizens. Mitch Snyder, the former director of the Community for Creative Non-Violence, had on several occasions almost starved himself to death in an attempt to advocate for the needs of homeless people. One mayor in a southern city proposed to spray community garbage with poison to dissuade homeless people from eating out of public refuse cans. This mayor likened himself to an exterminator taking care of a population of vermin. In other cities bands of teenage hooligans have knifed and set afire homeless people sleeping in public parks. Each of these is an intense and extreme reaction to the visible presence of homeless men and women.

The intensity and irrationality of these reactions jar us and demand that we attempt to understand just what has aroused such powerful emotional responses. Clearly, these responses do not merely derive from an intellectual perspective on the shortage of housing among the nation's poor. When we look at homeless men and women, we see more than just people who must live without adequate shelter. We see the reflection of something that both frightens and shocks us and from which we must turn away.

Social scientists tell us that homeless people suffer from more than a lack of housing. Not only are they without a place to sleep, but they are also profoundly alienated and disaffiliated from the larger culture. Homeless people have been called urban nomads by mental health researchers; modern-day gargoyles by a homeless street poet; and our living nightmares by Jonathan Kozol, author of the much acclaimed book *Rachel and Her Children*, which is about homeless families.¹ For most of us, homeless people are faceless specters who haunt our city streets only to spook us if we encounter them as we go about our business.

Homeless women, in particular, present us with an image that is difficult for us to comprehend. These are women who in no way live a life that we expect of a modern woman. They are totally disconnected from the popular American dream: a home in the suburbs, a white picket fence, and two children. But more significantly, they remain outside of our understanding of how women are supposed to live. Part of our discomfort in viewing these women is that we cannot easily make sense of their lives; it is much easier for us to understand the homeless man. There is a long tradition of the vagabond male, the hobo, and we can more

easily assimilate the image of the roving, wandering, disconnected man. The homeless woman, bundled in her overcoat, hunched over and clinging to the sides of city buildings, arouses so much dissonance in most men and women that we are unable to tolerate her.

In a psychological sense we can deal with her only if we define her as being fundamentally "other." She is different from us; she is that which we are not. One homeless woman described herself as both feeling like and being treated like she was from the moon. People could only relate to her if they thought of her as an alien—someone not from our planet, not from our culture, and not from our psychological world.

Jonathan Kozol reports, with some embarrassment, that after interviewing homeless families, he returned to his own lodgings and felt the need to cleanse himself physically.² While he knew that there was some logic to this bathing because he had in fact been with people who were infested with lice, he also knew that the cleansing served a ritual and metaphoric function for him. He needed to distance himself from the despair that he had experienced in the presence of these homeless families, almost as if he wanted to wash away the hopelessness that he had shared in their presence. While our rational minds tell us that homelessness and despair are not contagious, our preanalytic, more emotional selves urge us to disinfect ourselves thoroughly, lest our dealings with these urban untouchables contaminate us in some permanent way.

In the conclusion to his book, Kozol remarks that the graves in Potter's Field, a cemetery in which homeless people are buried, have no markers.³ The graves have no markers by design, because city officials have decided that they do not want to glorify the lives of poor, homeless people. They do not want in any way to memorialize the death or life of a social outcast. The lack of a personal marker also says that we as a society are uncomfortable recognizing the individual humanity of these people. We do not want to believe that they are real people, separate, unique individuals like us. Rather, we want to continue the fantasy that they are aliens, that they are part of an anonymous, nameless horde that we can continue to keep at a safe distance from ourselves.

Shelter providers have noted that when people become home-

less, their identity as homeless people seems so powerful that it tends to obliterate any previous identity. Project Help, in New York City, an outreach program to homeless people, reports that over 50 percent of the people they serve are listed merely as John or Jane Doe.⁴ While some homeless individuals have personal reasons for not wanting to reveal their identities to authorities, there may be another determinant of the overwhelming anonymity of the homeless population: namely, that when one becomes homeless, one's previous identity seems not to count, not to matter. These individuals often refer to the events of their past lives as if those events were indeed part of the distant past. A woman might say "I used to be a mother," or "Once I worked in a store." All of these other identities take the form of "ex" identities with the only identity seeming to matter currently being one's identity as a homeless person. That the lack of permanent housing should become the core of one's identity suggests that homelessness is more than just the absence of a place to sleep or a place to live; homelessness comes to define an individual in a fundamental way, so much so that it becomes all that he or she is.

The desire to keep homeless women and men at a safe distance from the rest of the populace seems to be one of the considerations used when locations for shelters to house homeless people are selected. The city of Boston, for example, buses its homeless people to a shelter on a promontory that juts into Boston Harbor.⁵ While the city has economic and logistical justifications for this policy, the result is that homeless people are placed almost out at sea, far from the rest of the citizenry. One cannot help but be reminded of the solution that New York City recently devised for handling its garbage. City sanitation workers put the garbage on a barge, set it out to sea, and searched for a site to dump it, a safe distance from the rest of the population.

In some states there is even a move to resurrect some of the abandoned old buildings at state mental hospitals to serve as shelters for homeless people. Many of these hospitals, which have been refuges for outcast members of society in the past, are located far away from downtown metropolitan areas. In a surprising act of advocacy, members of a neighborhood in Queens where homeless people were to be sheltered at a state psychiatric facility

suggested that the presence of homeless men and women on the grounds of the state hospital might have an adverse effect on the psychiatric patients who were housed there.⁶ Homeless people are thought of as so aberrant, so outside the mainstream of society, that we are even worried that they will harm or contaminate psychiatric patients, who have been traditionally defined as alien and other than the rest of us.

The most recent "humane" suggestion for sheltering homeless people came during the 1988 presidential campaign debates when then Vice-President George Bush advocated using empty barracks on some large army bases as temporary shelters. While the suggestion was intended to alleviate the tragic shortage of affordable housing, it was frighteningly reminiscent of past "humane" uses of internment camps during World War II for Japanese Americans.

What is it about homeless people, especially homeless and often mentally ill women, that repels us to the point of needing to place these people at a safe and extended distance from the rest of us? How is it that we have come to view other human beings as so much debris, needing to be packed up, shipped off, and hidden from view? It does seem to be true that our society has never been very good at knowing how to treat things or people that are damaged, broken, or no longer useful. We pollute our water and our air with the by-products of our consumption; we bury our nuclear waste and naïvely hope it will go away; and we tragically clutter our city streets with the living shadows of broken lives and shattered dreams. We want damaged goods out of sight and far away.

It is especially pertinent that homeless women are often referred to as "bag ladies." Taken literally, this name derives from the fact that many homeless women walk around the streets carrying all of their belongings in shopping bags, or pushing everything that they own in front of them in a shopping cart. These women are quite literally weighted down with baggage. When we come to know homeless women in a more personal way, we often discover that the contents of these bags have frequently been collected from garbage cans or from thrift shops. These women carry with them baggage that has been discarded by other women.

At a metaphoric level the bag lady, weighted down with cast-

offs collected from the trash of wealthy matrons, is a disconcerting image. In the popular vernacular we describe our neuroses, those parts of ourselves that we would like to disown and with which we feel uncomfortable, as our "psychological baggage." Self-help books frequently admonish us to rid ourselves of the metaphoric and psychological baggage that we carry. It is doubly interesting that homeless women—bag ladies—carry with them baggage, baggage that is quite literally not only the leftover, discarded possessions of other members of the society, but also baggage that may, at a metaphoric level, represent those elements of our psychological selves for which we no longer have any use or with which we are no longer comfortable. I am suggesting that homeless women carry for us our literal baggage and our psychological baggage, and that some of our great need to distance ourselves from them represents our need to distance ourselves from our own psychological, disowned, or unused parts.

How then can we come to look inside the baggage that homeless women carry for us? How do we become more familiar with these cast-off and discarded elements so that we can free these women from having to carry our bags for us and, at the same time, come to know ourselves better?

This book is about homeless women, specifically the disheveled, slightly mad bag lady, the woman whose furtive glance makes us look away, who had she lived four hundred years ago might have been burned as a witch. Even as the population of homeless women changes to include more homeless mothers with children, economically marginal single women, and inner-city crack addicts, the bag lady continues to haunt our collective imaginations, signifying more than her individual life, resonating with images at the core of all women. Indeed, this book is about modern women and about personal and psychological integration. It is my hope that in coming to understand homeless women, we will also come to understand ourselves more fully. If we can repossess those parts of ourselves that we have cast off, we will not only become more whole and more fully human, but we will also unburden those who currently carry some of these discarded aspects of femininity and humanity for us.

In attempting to understand the lives of homeless women, we face an ethical and methodological problem. We want to allow

women the opportunity to share their individual and personal stories with one another and with us; yet we want to respect their privacy. We want to understand the significance their stories have for all of us; yet we want to avoid turning them into objects of inquiry. We want to understand the transcendent significance of certain patterns; yet we want to avoid mythologizing and reifying the tragedy of their lives.

These women certainly deserve to be understood as unique individuals and to have their personal stories recorded. All too often when we speak of homeless men and women we use the collective noun, "the homeless." It is easier for us to remain distant from an anonymous horde of homeless people. When we select out of this undifferentiated mass a particular homeless woman, she gains a personal identity for us, making it much more difficult for us to view her as an alien creature. She becomes a real woman, with a real name and a real life story, and we have to treat her and respect her as such.

We are obliged to rescue homeless women from the anonymity into which they have been cast and to restore their own particular lives to them. In the telling of their personal stories, they reveal to us that, while the content of their lives may be very different from the lives most women lead, the structure and rhythm of their experiences are not very different from the ups and downs most of us encounter. These women have their successes as well as their failures; they have their triumphs as well as their defeats; and they have their hopes as well as their disappointments. It is important for their reaffiliation with the larger society that we allow them to recount their personal histories.

In reading or hearing these stories, however, it is hoped that other women, more fortunate women who have not experienced the profound disenfranchisement of homelessness, will recognize aspects of themselves that perhaps they have been unwilling to acknowledge. Consequently, the process of acknowledging the personal reality of a group of homeless women will serve a twofold purpose. It will rescue these particular women from the anonymity of homelessness, and will also allow other women to rescue their vulnerable and disowned psychological parts from the trash bags into which those parts have been cast.

I have chosen, in part, to recount the stories of homeless women

by allowing them to tell their own stories. Storytelling has always been a particularly female activity. Women have a history of talking with one another over the backyard fence and over the coffee table in the morning, talking with their daughters and with their sisters. While this conversation has often been denigrated and devalued as idle gossip, it has been not only a way in which women have connected with other women, but also a way in which women have imparted their particular philosophies or world views to one another.

Because women have traditionally been preoccupied with the everyday tasks of managing a home and managing a family, their stories are often interwoven with the mundane details of their lives. Women do not impart their world views directly, and are less likely than men to write philosophical treatises. Their views of the world are conveyed rather indirectly, almost as distractions or asides in the telling of a particular tale.

The rhythm of women's stories may be seen as paralleling the texture of a woman's life.⁷ In the process of going about her business or in the process of telling her story, a woman often interjects a piece of wisdom that she has garnered from her life experience. Writers have commented that in the sharing of stories, women can come to form a community—a spiritual community perhaps somewhat akin to that which develops in churches when people testify and share their religious experiences with one another.

Sheila Collins, a feminist theologian, suggests that in the process of collective storytelling women may begin to discern patterns—similarities among their separate lives—that allow them not only to bond with other women, but also to offer validation to the individual woman who is telling her story.⁸ For many of the women who contributed to this book, the telling of their stories was a profoundly moving experience. They discovered aspects of themselves that they had forgotten or ignored. Some refined and retold their stories several times. Having their stories heard and valued allowed them to value and reown their experiences.

As stories are told and retold, the inessential details fade, and women are left with images that carry a mythological or transcendent message. In telling the stories of individual homeless women, it is my hope that I will not only provide a cathartic experience for