

# The Mission

by  
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Well, it finally happened. I knew we were gonna run out of money sooner or later and, for the first time since running away from home a month ago, we'd hit bottom. The streets of Houston were growing dusky now, and our thoughts began turning to where we'd spend the night.

Actually, we weren't completely broke, we did have a few dollars left. But we were saving that to get out of town with. Plus, we figured we'd need a couple of bucks for coffee and toast in the morning.

The block where the Greyhound Bus station was seemed to be the hub of life for the down-and-outers in the city. On one corner of the block sat a divey little bar called The Diamond Club, where mostly old men and pimps hung out. Then there was the Greyhound station. Beyond that was a coffee shop, then, at the end of the block, was the Manpower employment service.

In those days you could hang out in the bus station all night if you wanted. Nowadays, they'll kick you out after midnight if you don't have a ticket to prove you're waiting for a bus. But even if you did spend the night there, you had to stay awake. Otherwise, a cop would come along a wake you up with a nudge from his nightstick.

All in all, the Greyhound wasn't a good place to be. If it wasn't the cops or the stayin' awake all night, then it was some pimp or druggy hassling you about speed or a lay, or else some bum, frothing at the mouth, hassling you about nothin' at all. Yes, bus stations are no place to stay when you're tired. It's better to sleep behind a dumpster somewhere.

And we *were* tired. I remember my ankles wincing with pain at every step I took on the hard pavement. My friend, Blake, and I had arrived in the city only two days ago and it seemed like all we'd done since was walk.

It's a long story, but basically what happened is this: we were two seventeen year olds who had run away from our homes in California about a month before. We had done some adventuring down in Mexico; now we were almost broke and were stalking the streets of Houston, trying to scare up some dough before we moved on.

As we turned the next corner we saw it: The Star of Hope Mission. I sighed deeply as I looked up at the pathetic neon sign flashing, "STAR OF HOPE -- STAR OF HOPE". Blake and I both had the same thought and so, in silence, we walked the few short paces to the door and went in.

We had been there the day before to take advantage of the free coffee and donuts, but neither of us had thought about spending the night. I guess the place had repulsed us, it being a holy roller, skid row mission and all. It just hadn't crossed our minds to stay there.

As we went through the doors we were first confronted by this hideous sign. It was sort of this sandwich board job with this picture of a drunk inside a wine bottle with the caption, "Lord help me!" underneath. What made it so unappealing wasn't the subject matter, but rather the artwork. The guy inside the bottle was wearing these sort of orange clothes and his skin was reddish (I guess from all the booze he'd been drinking). And

then the bottle was made of green glass! Obviously the guy who painted the thing had no artistic training -- didn't even know that red and green were opposites. I suppose one could be philosophical and say that it was all symbolic. I don't know. What made it even worse was that the guy in the bottle was handsome. He had black hair and a beard, and looked like the actor who played Sinbad in those old movies with the bad special effects. It just didn't fit.

As soon as we passed through the door this toothless, old, blondhaired dude in cowboy garb greeted us with a , "Praise gawd, how d'ya do?" and pointed to the right. in addition to being such a weird old character to begin with, the guy was as skinny as a post. I just couldn't help but give him the nickname, "Slim," in my mind. Off to the right was the dining room, and off to the left was the chapel. The dining room was where we had the donuts the day before. It seemed as though Slim wanted us to go in there now, so we complied.

Apparently we had timed our arrival just about right. When we walked in, there were just a few younger fellows like us sitting on folding chairs. However, we'd got there just before feeding time, and it wasn't too long before all the nightly zoo creatures started wandering in. This was amusing at first -- all these guys scuffling along like clowns . You know, like when Red Skelton used to dress up like a hobo. There were big fat guys; there were lurchy old men. It was funny. That is, until I realized I was all a part of it.

For dinner that night they had vegetable stew. We ate it out of these stainless steel bowls. Everybody filed through a line and this big black man who looked sort of like Don King slapped a serving into your bowl with a ladle. The stew looked rather questionable, but I was hungry so I ate.

As I sat there eating, I tried to keep my eyes off all the old men. When I did look up it disgusted me: toothless faces gumming away, whiskers full of bits of broccoli and mashed corn -- yuck! In revulsion I dropped my head back down to the attention of my bowl.

After dinner, there was ice cream for dessert -- yippee! The black guy now went around with a box of vanilla ice cream and plopped two scoops into everyone's bowl -- the same bowls we used to eat the stew out of. It was kind of gross eating the ice cream with stew juice swirling around at the bottom, but I ate it anyway. I was hungry. Really, it wasn't too bad. The stew gave the ice cream a kind of Chineseie flavor.

Before we were done with our ice cream, this fat guy with a crew cut and thick glasses came bustling into the room and hollered in a thick southern accent: "Any of you men wanna stay for the night, ya gotta come ova to the window and register if ya ain't registered awreaddie!"

He then shot over to the window with his fat little finger pointing ahead of him, shouting, "ova heya, ova heya!"

He bolted through this door at the side of the room which led into a small office and, a second later, popped up behind a little glass window with a hole cut in it -- like at a movie theater. He leaned forward to the hole and spoke loudly into the hole, like a person who is hard of hearing. "O.k., what's yer name?" he asked the first customer, and then went on from there.

By the way we were standing in line, Blake went before me. This way, I got to hear what the interrogation was like before it became my turn.

"What's yer name, sonny?" the fat guy barked.

"Blake Lockett."

"What's yer social security number?"

"My social security number?" Blake hesitated.

"I need yer social security number!" he snapped again in an irritated voice.

"553-68-4816."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Wha . . . yer only seventeen?"

"Yeah, that's right, seventeen!" I could tell Blake was becoming fed up with the guy.

"Golly, you're just a kid . . . golly!" he crinkled his nose and squinted as he tried to get a good look at Blake through his coke bottle glasses. His eyes then dropped down to the paper in front of him and he jotted down the information.

Then came my turn, as Blake stood off to the side and waited for me.

After he'd gone through the same line of questioning and found out that I too was seventeen, he just stood there and eyeballed both of us for a while. His mouth pursed up into a little rectum and his eyes were like a cartoon character's, magnified to twice their size through the thick lenses.

"You two are jus' seventeen?" he asked again as if he'd never heard of such a thing. "Seventeen . . . golly," he blabbered once more, his jowels flopping back and forth. "Golly."

When the registration session was over with, he shot back out of his little booth and stepped up on top of a folding chair in the middle of the room.

"O.k., now everybuddy listen. Now, everybuddy!" The clamor in the room subsided. The pudgy man continued, "I want allayas ta head ova into the chapel where the service will begin in justa few minutes." He then plopped down off the chair, went back into the booth, and finished up his business.

The collective mumbling of the men rose again as they all shuffled out of the room, past the man-in-a-bottle sign, and into the chapel, moving like well rehearsed characters in a children's play.

The chapel was about twice the size of the dining hall. On the walls were pictures of Jesus. Some of the artwork had apparently been done by the same guy who had painted the bottle sign. In some of the pictures Jesus, too, looked a bit like Sinbad. Other pictures were from a more familiar stock: faded prints on cardboard, some in gold plastic frames. They had probably been donated from some church. Yes, I remembered him well from Sunday school. There he was . . . playing with the children, praying in the garden, knocking on the U.N. building. There were about ten rows of pews in front. In the back were folding chairs. Blake and I sat in one of the last rows of pews, comfortable, yet far enough from the action to feel somewhat anonymous.

After everyone had gotten settled into their seats, "Fats" came marching in, Bible in hand, and went up and mounted the pulpit.

"Revelations threeeee-twenty: 'Behold, ah stand at the dowah an' knock: if any man heya mah voice and open the dowah, ah will come inta him and sup with him and he with me.'" Although his Bible was opened, he recited the passage without looking down.

His parishioners sat there, lumped together in ragged disinterest. The man was comical, indeed; a caricature of his role if there ever was. Yet, he had a genuineness about him -- an intensity of concern, which penetrated through all his goofiness.

He pounded the pulpit three times with one hard knuckle. POP, POP, POP, the sound rang throughout the hall and all the murmuring came to a stop.

"Ya hear that?" He repeated the knock. "Ya hear that? That's Jesus knockin' on the door ta yer heart." And from somewhere behind that flabby face and those thick little glasses issued forth tones of love and caring. He seemed worried about us and that bothered me.

He then went on to read a few more passages from the book -- promises of the beauty of heaven and the pain of hell.

After he finished speaking, he announced that there would be special guests that night, that some of the good folks from -- some holiness church with a strange and many-parted name that I can't remember -- had been kind enough to give up one of their free nights to come and minister. I felt privileged.

At this, a blue-suited man (about 30) and his fat wife came up front. There was an old upright piano which sat in one corner of the room. The wife sat at the upright and the blue suit took center stage behind the pulpit. I figured we were gonna sing, and we did.

We sang three or four Christian hymns. Some sounded familiar, but I really couldn't say that I *knew* any of them. The wife was an awful pianist: no sense of meter or harmony, or anything. All she was, was loud. She sounded like a hurdy gurdy that had been thrown off a cliff -- thrown off a cliff and then run through a stack of Marshalls for volume.

After the singing part was over, the blue-suited guy gave his sermon. But it wasn't a sermon really. He just went on about how he felt called to minister and about how his heart went out to us. I could tell that he really did care, and I felt sorry for him for some reason. I kept wanting to tell him that I was all right and that he shouldn't worry.

After the sermon was over, the fat guy took the pulpit again and asked if there was anyone who wanted to tell what Jesus had done for them. No one responded.

He made the request again, this time more urgently.

Then, the black fellow who had served us the stew and ice cream stood up. He was embarrassed, you could tell. He sort of dropped his chin into his neck and mumbled something about his being an alcoholic and how God loved him. Then he kind of trailed off into silence and sat down. I was touched by his shyness and was sorry that he had to get up and say something just to please the fat guy.

The next to get up was Slim, the toothless wonder who had greeted us when we'd first arrived. He spoke with a slight lisp, but he smiled a lot and made it very clear that Jesus was the son of God and had saved his soul from the devil. He then sat down, appearing very satisfied with his performance.

No one else got up to speak.

The fat guy then asked if there was anyone in the crowd who wanted to ask Jesus into their heart and become a Christian. He asked for everyone to close their eyes and for the ones who wanted to become Christians to slip their hands up into the air. It seemed simple enough, so I did it. I had always been sort of sympathetic towards anything having to do with the church. It just seemed like a show of support for me to stick my hand up.

Then, when I opened my eyes, I saw the fat guy standing down at the front with a bearded wino in a trench coat. "Come on, I saw one more hand out there," he said, frowning out over the congregation from behind all his blubber.

I was scared. I looked over to Blake. He had a concerned expression on his face. He must've peeked! He must've seen me raise my hand. "Don't worry," I said. "They're not gonna get me." I waited it out, and finally the fat guy let it go.

The sleeping quarters for the mission were located upstairs. The room looked like something out of a 1950s movie about an infirmary. There were metal-framed bunk beds painted stark white. The walls and ceiling were also white and the floor was made of cement and had built-in drain grates. It was made so that all they had to do to clean it was to hose it down.

In keeping with the tight standards of cleanliness, we were all required to take showers. For this, the mission had a convenient little shower room off to the side of the bunk area.

What followed was one of the most bizarre experiences I've ever had with communal showering. Those who were accustomed to the arrangement immediately stripped and filed off into the shower. They discarded their clothes, somewhat askew, into piles outside the door to the shower. Blake and I, along with a few other first timers, just stood there in shock.

"Ya gotta take a shar before bed," Slim told us.

"Yeah, well I was waiting 'til some of the others got done before I . . . "

"It's o.k., go ahead, thar's plenty of room."

"Yeah" . . . well, o.k."

I then, with great care and trepidation, began to disrobe. I laid my clothes on a bench off to themselves, so as not to get them confused with someone's socks or something.

As I said before, many of the regulars at the mission were old guys. I remember having to look at all those limp penises and sagging asses. I hoped to God I wouldn't accidentally brush up against anyone's skin.

Each of the shower heads was operated by a pull chain. You'd stand underneath it and pull the chain and the water would come out -- I'd never seen that before. Many of the old bums simply gave a tug or two on the chain, got their hair wet, and went and got a towel. (The black guy was standing at the exit to the shower with a heap of towels). Some of the others would get all wet and soapy and then spend a great amount of time rinsing off. They would have stayed in there for days if they could have.

All this reminded me of one of the scenes from the movie, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* where all the patients were required to go swimming. It was creepy watching all of these winos, half in delirium, all naked in the shower together.

There was one very tall, bearded old man. He was all pop-eyed, trying to figure out where he was and what was happening. He soaked underneath one of the shower heads as someone else held down the chain for him. Then he began feeling aroused I suppose. His flaccid old dick began to grow and he started urinating wildly all over the shower in a big heavy stream.

"Oh God!" I screamed, backing away, trying to avoid the fire hose gone wild. "Shit!" I exclaimed as the stream crossed my foot. "Get him out of here!"

"Yeah. Get him out of here!" someone else yelled.  
After he was gone, I made sure to thoroughly rinse myself off.  
I dried myself, dressed myself, and after that it was into my bunk and lights out. I was glad that the experience of the mission was essentially over with, and I could truly rest.