

# Harvest Time in the City

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By Joni M. Fisher

For five years I watched for a certain homeless man like others anticipate the first robin in springtime. He came out with the perennials in downtown New Orleans, Louisiana. A frail, aging black man, dressed in thrown-away clothes, he stood for hours on the lawn of the public library on the corner of Tulane and Loyola Avenues. Neither soaking rain nor scorching sunshine moved him indoors. He endured like a displaced scarecrow.

Having grown up in Wisconsin, where the homeless sometimes freeze to death, I wasn't accustomed to seeing guys like him or pretending I didn't. For the most part he was deliberately ignored and he ignored in return. Could he see more than shadows and motion through the white film of cataracts? Even other 'street people' avoided him, sleeping instead in the remote seats of the air-conditioned library during the day while this scarecrow stood outside on the lawn.

His five-foot frame stooped as his overcoat flapped against his orange and green plaid shirt and brown pants. The crotch of his pants sagged halfway down his thighs, pants unsupported by his rope belt or his shrunken frame. Stick-like shins stuck out beneath the tattered ends of his pants then disappeared into large, unbuckled, black rubber boots. His wrists extended into knobby, gnarled fingers, the kind that grew from years of painful arthritis or repeated injury. Thick, yellow nails and hard, dry calluses covered his stubby fingers.

Like a scarecrow overseeing crops, this shrunken form drove birds, squirrels and other timid souls away. He had somehow defied the efforts of weather and the natural process of decay that recycles things. Three wild patches of yellow whiskers sprouted from the furrows on his face. It was a sign that something grew from the living humus. The horrific smelling rot of his body and clothes refuted the life still clinging to him. It drove people upwind off the sidewalk into traffic.

What kind of tragedy or mental illness drove him to become so detached from life? I didn't understand. As an officer at the largest bank in the state, I aspired to absolute yuppie hood. I had the status job with the window office and overpriced, covered parking. In my late twenties, a college graduate, I was making enough money writing user manuals and designing training aids to convince myself I couldn't afford to pursue my real goals in life. I couldn't afford to write a novel, to risk failure. I had plenty of time.

The Scarecrow, as I came to think of him, communicated through simple gestures – an open hand, a shrug, a nod. He was harmless, small, old and pathetic, which made it easy for me to approach him from upwind. By giving him an apple a day on my way to work in the Big Easy, I thought we both benefited. He gained a little food and I felt noble for doing a good deed that could not be repaid. Ignoring him would have eaten away at my conscience.

One day during the second spring he didn't bob his head in response to receiving the apple. Of course, it was a small thing, a tiny change in a familiar routine, but it got my attention. For the first time, I spoke to him.

“Do you like apples?”

He nodded then bared his naked gums.

Chagrined, I said, “What do you do with the apples?”

His pants had crusty, stiff folds that scraped together like sandpaper as he shuffled along on the grass. By the time we reached the Times-Picayune States-Item vending box there was a scruffy-looking man standing by it. Scruffy and I looked at each other suspiciously, while Scarecrow placed the apple on the box.

Scruffy suddenly smiled and held out his hand to me. “You the apple lady.”

I presumed it was a question. “Yes.” We shook hands.

“Why you been giving him apples?”

“I like apples.” At that moment I envied all tunneling animals. No such escape for me.

Scruffy laughed and handed grapes to Scarecrow. For the next three years he got bananas, oranges and grapes from me. I enjoyed our daily ritual. It gave me purpose and a feeling of being needed. The giant corporation I worked for proclaimed it needed its people even after profits fell below projections and they handed out pink slips at Thanksgiving. My colleagues called the layoffs ‘getting the bird’ because the pink slips came with the customary coupon for a Thanksgiving turkey. Did I really belong in a place where managers called their people resources?

In mid-May of my fifth spring of feeding this nameless, toothless soul, he disappeared. I asked at the library. They didn’t know. I called a friend who worked a few blocks away as an intern at Charity Hospital, also known as the Big Free. After Kay

complained that someone had stolen her wallet while she was sleeping in the doctor's lounge, I asked about Scarecrow.

"You'll have to be more specific," she said, "Short, old, black and unkempt sounds like half the crowd here."

"I don't know his name. He probably weighs ninety pounds and has no teeth. He has cataracts. Wears huge black rubber boots."

"Oh, that's Stinky. I haven't seen him lately, but I'll check on it and get back to you. Why do you want to know about him?"

"I haven't seen him lately. I just wondered."

"Tell me you don't give those guys money."

"I don't give those guys money."

"Good. Let me remind you that some of them are reality challenged and addicted." A high-pitched tone sounded in the background. "Blast, the ER's tugging my leash again. Gotta go."

I went back to my office where two MBA interns, wearing identical Brooks Brothers suits, introduced themselves. They had been sent as test dummies to take the computer-based training lesson for the new system scheduled to go on-line in a month. The fruits of years of labor would soon be harvested. These men were representative of the typical loan officers at our bank, only twenty pounds lighter. They couldn't type and they feared computers. Like the upcoming software system, these guys were models of impersonal efficiency. At the rate they poked their keyboards their thirty-minute lessons took an hour. I was tempted to reveal that the secretaries we used to test the lessons

earned higher scores in half the time, but the male ego is such a fragile thing. I bit my lip.

That night at 6:00 p.m. the phone rang in my office. Managers often called after hours to identify the ‘dedicated’ employees, so I played along delivering the full official telephone greeting according to company policy.

After a long pause, Kay said, “I was waiting for the beep to leave a message. I thought bankers had better hours.”

“Sure we do, Kay. Just like all doctors have time to golf.”

“Well, I found the chart on Stinky. He’s a fifty-year-old John Doe. He died two days ago. No friends or family. So he went unclaimed.”

Unclaimed meant his body could go to one of the medical schools in town for cadaver lab, dissection by the numbers. I didn’t ask.

“Thanks for checking.” Fifty?

On the way to the parking lot I passed his spot on the lawn and saw birds gathered there. I cried all the way home. There I began my writing career in earnest -- with a letter of resignation.

Scarecrow had died years before he was buried. Just as he was waiting to die, I was waiting to live. Bribed by luxury, I had given up living and hadn’t realized it. Scarecrow showed me the high cost of postponing goals and dreams. This was real life in the grownup world. No guarantees for a second chance. No do-overs.

In his last years, he hadn’t voted or paid taxes. Gallup hadn’t polled him. Census takers hadn’t counted him. Presidents and fashions had changed without him. Out of

work, out of hope, out of time, he had waited through his season with outstretched hands and quietly disappeared.

He taught me that the safety net from failure is not money. It's faith.