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**A DEEPENED PERSPECTIVE:
UNDER THE BRIDGE**

Brianne Kankel

I GREW UP AS THE ULTIMATE SPONGE TO THE WORDS OF MY PARENTS AND THE OTHER ADULTS AROUND ME. THE WORDS THEY Poured OUT WERE STORED PERMANENTLY, LATCHING ON IN MY MIND, AFFECTING HOW I WOULD VIEW PEOPLE FROM THEN ON. ACCORDING TO THEM, PEOPLE CHOSE TO BE HOMELESS. I was told that there are many options available for them to turn their lives around, and that they just had to want to change. The status of living on the streets was due to their own transgressions. As a consequence, their bad choices were holding them back from a better life. I was taught that they were homeless for one of two reasons. One, they were homeless because they chose a life of drugs and are now addicts who do not want to get clean, or two, because they are non-conforming law breaking criminals who never learned to be disciplined or how to follow reasonable standards of society. These people survived off of the good deeds of others, expecting free handouts and using manipulation in order to support their lives of crime.

This year, I have come face to face with some of the harsh realities of homelessness. This fall, my little sister Amy has fallen into the life of living on the streets, and regrettably I must say that her behavior fits every single thing that my parents told me about people who are homeless. She has made the decision to be homeless in the sense that she felt that she had no other choice. She told us on her 18th birthday that she was leaving. She no longer wanted to follow the rules of the house or abide by law. At the time, she was abusing drugs and struggling with alcoholism.

The one thing my parents didn't explain to me when I was a kid, was how sometimes people have monsters living inside of them, and that sometimes these monsters make people do scary things that they wouldn't normally do. These monsters go by names like Self-Hate, Depression, Grief, Rejection, Mental Illness, and PTSD, just to name a few. Amy has been fighting monsters since a very young age. She was adopted at 5 weeks old, born to a teenage mother who debated abortion for most of the pregnancy, and barely knows a father, a father who was in jail for aggravated assault

with a deadly weapon. Unbeknownst to me, her whole life she has viewed herself as nothing more than a daughter of a criminal and child worth so little that she was almost aborted. I realize those things are far from the truth; Amy is a remarkable person. As someone who was also adopted, I can relate and understand that there are distortions in our minds that tell us stuff that isn't true. I went through a long period where I struggled with my worth as well. Often, with adopted kids, it is common for them to struggle with feelings of loss, anger, and inadequacy; these are the inevitable monsters many of us carry on our backs.

Amy's monsters go by the names of Borderline Personality, Depression, and Addiction. She still fights Self-Harm sometimes as well. Amy's dependence on people came from her adoption and her feelings of being unlovable. She latches on to whoever will take her, no matter how self-deprecating being with them they may be for her. For Amy, her need for love and attention trumps absolutely everything else in her life. Borderline pulls people in, uses them, and

pushes them away. Borderline makes her unable to truly form meaningful relationships with other people because of a fear. This fear, a fear of rejection, sabotages all who come close to her. Terrified that she will be told that she is not enough, an anxious panic overrides her ability to form close relationships, creating a barrier of isolation that reinforces the ideas she already holds within her head. Addiction traps her. What started as a way to escape has become her puppeteer, a new God that she now seeks out relentlessly and endlessly. Depression shrouds her in a cloak of hopelessness, a cloak that tells her that this life on the street is all that she is worth, all that she deserves, and that there is no use in trying to escape because Depression promises to grab her by the neck and pull her back down if she ever tries.

The street has turned her into a stranger. She panhandles and steals; she lies and has let go of some of the values that I know she once held close to her heart. She is no longer the little sister I grew up with, but I know that my baby sister is still in there. I don't understand her continued choice

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to be homeless. We have offered her the opportunity to go to rehab the second she is willing and decides to make the leap to recovery. Currently, she sleeps under the bridge near the local hospital. The weather is getting increasingly cold, and she goes days without eating. She is being beaten by an abusive boyfriend who won't let her leave him. Yesterday we found out that she has another black eye. She currently is sick with laryngitis and has no plans to visit a doctor. If I were her, even just one of these things would be a reason to go home and seek help. I don't understand where her mind is at anymore, but I know for sure that Amy is not in control. When I look in her eyes, there is no light. Replacing the once hazel glow is a pained and empty gaze that could only

belong to these horrible creatures. I know she is fighting for her life against these monsters, for I once stood in her shoes. Only by the grace of God, circumstance, and the constant support and love of those around me, I made it out alive.

Now when I think of homelessness, I think Amy. It's much harder to group everyone that lives on the streets as criminals and lowlifes when I'm thinking of my little sister. I love Amy with all my heart. Something I never realized until she was gone is that I should have been a better sister. I'm regretting years of not spending enough time with her because I honestly do not know if or when I will see her again.

My perception about why people are homeless hasn't changed for the most



THRIFT STORE CORNERS Anna Boling

part, but expanded, branching into new categories of understanding. Through my own observations, I can now see the person beyond what the surface shows and a raw vulnerability we all have inside us. I have a new understanding of the pressures and uncertainties of life, and that sometimes when people make bad decisions, they aren't always being made rationally. Life can blind even the strongest willed person into making a bad decision in a moment of great weakness. Changed now is not only my perspective on the homeless, but on people in general. Instead of seeing just the dirt and rags, and sunken eyes and starved ribs, I can now see a struggling human, one who has a story to tell. I see a person who has

lost and loved, a person who is desperately searching for something that she lacks. I can now understand that no one is inherently choosing homelessness, despite what they might say. These are all beautiful souls who have been consumed by the darkness of the monsters they fight. I see a people who at one time had a family to love them, just as my family loves Amy. I see humanity. I have always felt sorry for the homeless, but now, instead of pity, it is empathy that shines through. The old truths I was told when I was young are all still present, but the depth and insight I have gained from personal experience has dissolved the fog over my eyes and now lets me see the person inside.



CITY'S TEARS Andrew Barba