

Street Life



“It’s not so bad,” he says to the reporter. “I got my dog here and over there’s Jadon and here’s Maria. They’re my friends. I got what I need.” He rubs his head as he talks.

“What do you figure you live on every week?” probed the reporter.

“Oh, I dunno. I try to get one of them under-\$1 tacos every day. It’s got, you know, meat and cheese and stuff. It tastes good, too. And then I panhandle some. That usually gets me another meal’s worth every day, plus a little that I can put together at the end of the week for more dog food.”

“Do you miss not living in a house or a building of some type,” the reporter still picking away.

“Naah, you can’t miss what you never had. I wanted to try that but it hasn’t worked out yet. Maybe someday when I get things figured out.”

“Any idea what you’re trying to figure out?”

“Sure. Same as anyone. What am I supposed to be doing to get my life together? If I could answer that I’d be able to plug away at it until I found it. But it’s a little bit mysterious to me. I don’t hardly know where to even get started on that question.”

“Where did you live when you were growing up?”

“We moved around a lot. My dad disappeared and my mom just slipped into this lifestyle. It was flexible. If we had money or we didn’t have money we didn’t have to worry about not having a place to sleep. And it was a place to come home to.

Most of the time I was growing up we lived in this part of California. It doesn’t get real cold here in winter and it’s not all that hot in summer. It’s kind of perfect for living on the land.”

“So, you’ve lived in a tent since you were young?” still the reporter, digging for a story.

“Yeah, as long back as I can remember.”

“Did you ever see your dad after that?”

“Yeah, he showed up in my life when I was about 19. Mom was pretty sick; she died less than a year later. Dad found out about us, said he kind of kept tabs on us but just didn’t want us to have to deal with him if he lived with us. He was doing some kind of drugs and some of the time I couldn’t hardly understand him. I didn’t need a dependent, so I packed the tent that night and took off. Hitched and walked about 45 miles. Nice thing – if you don’t get rides you can just pitch your tent and sleep right there. Most of the time. I go to the local Libraries and charge my phone and check my email, so I’m okay with wherever I end up. I got to San Juan Capistrano in three days. There’s a railroad track running alongside the freeway and you can pitch a tent or just put your bag out on the rocks at the base of either side. It’s protected and you aren’t very visible from the freeway.

“I’ve been down here for about six months now. Got a job doing grunt work for a small heating company. They said they would train me if I proved to be a good worker. I gave it everything and was doing pretty good, until one day when I woke up with a splitting hangover and I was already two hours late for the job. I went in but they just looked at me and directed me to the office where they cut my final paycheck.

“Life’s not perfect, but I’m eating, I have a place to sleep, and my dog is eating, too. I’ve learned that there aren’t many promises in life, but you have those three things you’re

doing better than some. I'm not a competitive type but I always want to know where I am on the ladder."

"The ladder?"

"Yeah, you know, the one you climb up to reach success. I get a feeling about where I am on the ladder by looking at the people around me. Am I doing better or worse than them? The answer to that question tells me if I should be satisfied, be bummed, or be trying a little harder. Trina, my old girlfriend, used to tell me I would never be satisfied but I would always be trying, so I probably wouldn't be bummed. I think she's probably right."

"What do you see as your future?" the reporter continues to probe.

"What's a future and why would I care? I focus on today, what I need and what my dog needs. That's what I got. Anything more isn't a future, it's a dream. And, as far as I can see, it's a nightmare for a whole bunch of people. Chasing a puff of smoke that's a vision they think they see, but they can't quite get in focus. I dunno, man, that sounds like insanity to me. So, I just keep doing what I need to do to keep alive and happy today. I'm not always happy, but I'm still alive. I figure one out of two ain't bad, know what I mean?"

"Well, do you think that might be a pretty pessimistic view on life?" from the reporter.

"Naah. Pessimism is momentary. Survival is the objective and getting a smile or a nice moment during the day, the desire for that ain't from pessimism. I wake up in the morning and if my dog is beside me and the sun's shining and we ain't cold, I take that as the start of a good day. I bet a whole bunch of people that think they're better off don't have that good of a start to their day. And when they die, they'll die inside their skin, just like I will.

"Life ain't easy but it sure as hell ain't as complicated and frantic as most people think it should be. My simple life? I'd say, 'so far, so good.'"

"Thank you for the time to answer my questions," says the reporter. "I guess I have all I need. I just wanted to share with people what life is like from your perspective. Honestly, I think you have a more carefree, stressless life than most of the people that will read this article.

"I wish you and your dog well. Can I give you a few bucks for some lunch and maybe some food for your dog?"

"That would be nice. Yeah. Sure. Just remember when you see someone like me, we all have a story. It may not be the same as most people, but it's our story and that's really what a life is, right? A story."

The reporter smiles and nods, shuts of his phone to end the recording, and walks away thinking, "Part of that is what I expected. What I didn't see coming was recognition that life can be complex or simple. The lives we all see from our cars or walking on the street may not be as mixed up as we think. They may just be coping, and that's all most people do anyway. I hope I could cope as well as that gentleman, if I were in his shoes."

[Author's note: It is not my intent to glorify or simplify the situation in which many people live on the streets of the US. It is simply an attempt to humanize real people dealing with real circumstances.]

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