

The Man Outside

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END PAPER

A few days ago, on Tuesday, a homeless man began living in our alley. It's a sheltered place about 4 feet wide and 15 feet long, out of the way of street traffic, five or so steps up from the sidewalk level. A door at the end farthest from the sidewalk leads to our basement and back yard; the sides of the rectangle are one wall of our house and one wall of our neighbor's.

The man had wedged his bare foam mattress between those walls and spent most of his time lying there, sprawled out under a stained blue blanket, his feet extending over the top of the stairs.

My husband noticed him a few days before I did. When he came from work on Wednesday, he took our teenage sons aside for a conference. When I asked what they were talking about, they said it was nothing.

On Thursday morning, as we left for work together, we ran into a neighbor. "I see you've got a friend," he said, nodding in the direction of the alley. I looked over and saw the lump of blanket, the protruding feet.

"How long has he been there?" I asked my husband as we drove downtown. "A day or two," he said. "Is he all right?" I asked. "Is he alive?" "Yes," he answered. "I've seen him move."

He said he thought that maybe the man was sick; that his eyes looked glassy. If he was still there when we got home, said my husband, he'd call the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic and try to get some help.

I thought about it on the way downtown. We seemed unable to discuss whether we were so protective of our home that we were willing to kick him off our property, or whether we were kind enough to let him stay. We drove along in silence.

I wondered if I should offer the man some food, and then hesitated. My reaction would have been similar if there had been a cat in the back yard. I would have wanted to feed a hungry cat, but would have been afraid that if I put a saucer of milk out, I'd never get rid of the thing. It sickened me to realize that I was thinking the same way about a human being.

It was on my mind all day. I found myself becoming annoyed with my husband for trying to keep it a secret. He hadn't wanted me to know because he didn't want to hear what I would have to say on the subject. He'd wanted to take action without advice from me; he had probably thought I would be too soft-hearted.

When we got home Thursday night, the man was out to dinner. He seemed to go away at meal-times. We thought he'd probably found a place to get a free meal. My husband left word with the Free Clinic; he was told that a nurse would call. I called the Mobile Assistance Patrol, a private nonprofit group that travels around the city in a van, helping people who need it. I left a message on the patrol's answering tape, giving our whereabouts, not giving our names.

I asked my husband why he hadn't told me, and why he had told our sons not to tell me. He looked confused and hesitated for a long time before answering. "I didn't want to worry you," he said. I wasn't sure I liked being protected.

The man came home a short time later, nestling in under the covers. None of our calls for assistance were answered on Thursday night. We went out with friends, we slammed car doors, we thumped our way up and down the front stairs. If we had to pass the place where he was camped, we tried not to look at him. I wondered if he was watching us coming and going, toting shopping bags, driving away with friends, saying good-night when they dropped us off.

On Friday, my day off, I'd planned to take a bicycle ride but couldn't because the mattress was blocking the doorway to the basement. I put off weeding the small patch of front garden because I wanted to keep away. I didn't like his being there; I didn't like minding that he was there.

"He could just pull a knife on you," said a friend when I mentioned that I felt guilty about not offering him something to eat. "You can never know what someone like that is going to do."

Two windows in our house look out over the alley. It was easy to pull the curtains aside, just a tiny bit, to study the man. He was wearing a camouflage-patterned windbreaker, brown pants, new brightly colored running shoes — probably a giveaway from some agency — and a plastic "Great America" visor. He looked to be in his 30s. When he wasn't sleeping, he lay there on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, looking at his hands, staring at the wall.

In late afternoon, I called the nearest police station and identified myself as a homeowner in the neighborhood. I said I wasn't making a request for assistance, that I just needed some advice. I explained:

The officer was pleasant and understanding. "Have you talked with him, ma'am?" he asked. There was a quiet moment. "I'm kind of afraid," I said softly. He asked me if there was a man in the household.

"Yes," I said, "my husband." I thought about my husband discussing the man with the boys but keeping the news from me. The officer told me to tell my husband to

somewhere when he gets something to eat. He wouldn't do it where he sleeps." Well, if he gets up in the night to urinate, said the officer, he sure isn't going to take himself anywhere else to do it.

"He's on your property, ma'am," he said. "He's trespassing. You can call us and sign a complaint and we'll take him away."

My husband went out to the

"Why'd you have to wake me up?" said the man. "You didn't have to wake me up." This time, he didn't say OK to leaving. When he went out, later in the morning, his mattress and blanket were still there. We knew he planned to come back.

My husband put on a pair of work gloves and carried the mattress and blanket to the churchyard across the street from our house. Then he hosed down the spot in the alley where the man had stayed.

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talk to the man, to let him know that he was going to have to move on.

If the guy's a smoker, said the officer, he may be smoking there, and he could burn your house down. And maybe he's urinating there, he said, or otherwise relieving himself.

"Oh, no," I said. "I'm sure he does that in a park rest room or

man late Friday afternoon, brought him a beer and told him he'd have to leave. "He said OK," said my husband when he came back inside. We smiled at each other.

The next morning, the man was still asleep in the same spot. My husband went out again. "Hey, pal," he said. "You're really going to have to go. I'll have to call the cops if you don't go."

We all went out shopping, a regular chore, to a supermarket discount warehouse. When we returned, with the car loaded down with groceries, the mattress was still across the street, unoccupied. As we unpacked the car and dragged our provisions inside, we peered across the street, anxious to see whether he was there, whether he had found his things at their new location.

I wondered if he was close enough to see us carrying the cartons full of food inside the house. I wondered whether he was hungry, whether he was angry with us.

Late yesterday, we saw him again. He had found his bedding and dragged it to the sidewalk, where he was sleeping alongside the church.

He seemed to be OK. He was on the other side of the street. ■