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Blue Margaritas

by Suzanne Blokland

She is part of downtown Chicago at night, existing among the peddlers and beggars who make the affluent uneasy and cautious. She has no identity as an individual, but is loosely identified as a street person. Her world is static and repetitious, consisting of a few blocks of concrete. She walks them like a beat, pushing her baby in his stroller.

She becomes the calm eye at the center of a storm of bustling activity. Without a destination, she is passed by on all sides by people rushing toward something else. She does not move forward, but in a circle. Repeating her steps around the same city block.

She is a calm center, but her center is one of desperation. With no purpose, no hope, her life is only futility. She has been reduced to an animal, spending her time searching for food and shelter. Accosting couples, she asks for help. The baby is sick and needs to go to the hospital. We stop to listen to her plea. She needs a ride, but we do not have a car. We offer alternatives. We could call an ambulance, but she does not want this. We give her a little money and leave her to resume the timeless monotony.

We rush to make up for the lost time. It is opening night at the art gallery. Glamorous people admire the peculiar paintings depicting human suffering. They are intense. The gallery is packed with beautiful clientele sipping blue margaritas. The room stands in sharp contrast to the subject of the works displayed.

Here strangers interact without hurry. Admirers want to say a few words to the artist, perhaps shake his hand. He has captured so much on the canvases hanging before us. We want to linger here and emotionally respond to the suffering depicted in the works.

The woman with the baby is not here. She will never be here; only her suffering, in representational form. Suffering that has a face, that demands something from us is not welcome. Blue margaritas. Extravagances for those who have enough. Reluctantly we move on. We must hurry again to the restaurant. Our reservation is for eight o'clock.

The street is busy but controlled. Cars rush by, horns blare occasionally. Our shoes smack rapidly against the pavement. We walk in rhythm after awhile, thump, thump, thump. Conversation among us never slows our pace as we hurry to the restaurant. We talk of the woman with the baby. Because we had stopped, she no longer blends into the background, but stands out as an individual. Though we know nothing about her, she has become part of us. Further interactions with strangers on the street are unwanted and discouraged. We may smile, but we rarely speak more than a word or two. More often, we shake our heads. We do not want to give more money. We are torn between wanting to help at the moment and

wondering if we were fools afterwards. Enough for one night.

The Italian restaurant. Busy, bustling. Voices mingling into a cacophonous din. We are indoors and comfortable again. Someone comments that this place caters to all sorts, from casual diners to the elegantly dressed. Yet the customers blend into a uniform whole. They are alike in more ways than they are different. We buy drinks. It is only a few dollars. While we wait for a table, we notice the decor, painted to look old. A decaying building in Italy. The same paradox of affluence mingling in an atmosphere of representational poverty. Not real poverty. The menu is elaborate. An appetizer is five dollars. A meal is fifteen, maybe twenty dollars. But the food is excellent. Well worth the price. We enjoy sitting here, being part of this group.

As we leave the restaurant, we think about the woman pushing the stroller. We pass the art gallery. The artist is going home, smiling at the success of his opening. We smile and wave. We do not see the woman, but no doubt, she is there, pushing the baby in his stroller.