

3-2 Down, Out, and Dying for a Warm Bed  
by Marcus Warren

Please, God, let it be dawn soon. Let there be light and not the cruel orange glare of street lamps, but the rosy fingers of a new day and an end to this hell. Then it will all be over: my shivering, the bone-chilling cold of Montreal in May, and this bed, a plastic sheet under a motorway.

It feels as though it must be four in the morning, three at the absolute earliest. My feet are wrapped in a garbage bag, and the rest of me is covered in three layers of hand-me-downs and a torn plastic poncho. I fish my mobile phone out of my pocket, even though I've broken the strict rules of the exercise by bringing it with me, and see that the time is 12:54 in the morning.

A "street retreat," I have learned over the past couple of days, makes many demands of those taking part, among them the forsaking of all material possessions, such as mobiles. The rules are simple and explicit: you are not allowed to bring bedding, books, food, money, jewelry, watches, a change of clothes, or other "conveniences"; and in order to prepare ourselves fully for what lies ahead, we are told not to wash our hair or shave for five days prior to hitting the streets. The aim of the retreat is, according to the organizers, to "experience the unknown and the wholeness of life."

On the first day, the money that I received after rattling a polystyrene coffee cup for three-quarters of an hour amounts to zilch. Jonathan, a 25-year-old with a messy beard and teeth the color of tobacco, is a money magnet, seducing strangers into handing over cash just by walking up to them. "You have to believe in the goodness of people," he says. "You have to believe that you will get that two-dollar coin, and I know very well that had you stayed fifteen minutes longer, you would have made some money."

The night passes without incident, except for the laughter of those among us who can see their warm, inviting apartments from our bed of concrete. At first light, we stumble through the discarded needles that litter what had been our bedroom floor. But the group's spirits are surprisingly high, and people seem to be taking something positive from the experience.

"I feel free," says Claude Emile Racette, a 43-year-old acupuncturist, as we shuffle into the dining room of the Notre Dame-de-Bon-Secours convent for breakfast. "I feel joy knowing that they [the homeless] are the same as us. It's just that you can see their sickness, their death, and their aging."

In fact, the spectacle of homeless men killing time, the only resource they have in abundance, is anything but joyful. One man we meet outside the convent offers us drugs to help us make it through the next night.

"I'd say to anyone who asks me whether to join a street retreat, 'Try it, wake up,'" says Pierre Racine, 54, a psychologist and another retreat. "It's not just an enlightenment thing, it's a wake-up call." The trouble is that the homeless around us look as though they want not a wake-up call, but more sleeping pills. I start to wonder whether this is an experiment in empathy with the poor or one of personal enlightenment.

Somehow we survive, realizing that some boundaries between ourselves and the real homeless may have been crossed by our living on the street. Beyond our modest donations to charity, however, have we helped the poor in any way at all? For "enlightenment," should we read "self-indulgence"?

And yet, maybe you can make the world a better place, one person at a time. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell lists the lessons he learned from his travels through the underworlds of those two cities. Never again would he think that the homeless were simply "drunken scoundrels," "nor expect a beggar to be grateful" if he gave him a penny.

### Day One

At four o'clock in the afternoon, I practice meditation and take part in the first group "council" meeting. Two hours later, I line up for free soup and food handouts from the Salvation Army van. Later on that evening, at 8 p.m., I take shelter from rain under a pavilion in Chinatown, and at 10:30 I get some free hot dogs and hot chocolate from a van for homeless youngsters. Thirty minutes later, I hunt for overnight shelter, rejecting the park bandstand as too exposed and wet.

### Day Two

Finally, at one in the morning, I bed down for the night in an underpass, only to awaken four hours later at daybreak. At eight o'clock, I head for the open doors of the convent because after prayers they serve a hot breakfast of pizza and chips. At 12:15, I'm back on the street begging, but I don't make any money. At 1 p.m., I attend another council meeting, and slowly recover from the shame of begging. At five in the afternoon, I get in line for free supper with skateboarders and dope-smoking teens. By 9:30 p.m., I find overnight shelter under a motorway, but despite my exhaustion I can't sleep for the cold.

### Day Three

I wake up at five in the morning and warm up in the Metro. I start walking through the streets. At eight o'clock, I practice some meditation and have another council meeting. Finally, at nine in the morning, the retreat ends. It's time for a shave.