

## CONCRETE ISLAND

*Maybe the “why” is because some part of the Golden Rule is genetically encoded into both of us. But my own answer is more like the mountain-climber’s response: Because you are here, and because I can.*

**ALMOST EVERY EVENING** the fog returns to San Francisco from the Pacific Ocean. Like a huge monster made of cumulus cloud, the fog roils and expands. It squeezes into the inlet between Land’s End Beach and the Marin Headlands, then slides under the Golden Gate Bridge. A little further east it spreads itself to the right and to the left, slithering for miles atop the water of San Francisco Bay, obliterating the bay and every geographic feature and human-made structure less than 20 stories tall.

Perhaps if one could hover above the scene for a day or two it might seem as if the fog were not, after all, a self-powered dreadful creature. Up there, in the warm sunlight, it might seem as if the fog were more benevolent, like a thick duvet, and that the sun had been hired to push the comforter off the Bay Area in the morning and to pull it snugly back on for the night.

But most San Franciscans don’t worry about which fog-metaphor surrounds their city. They must be in the city, fog or no. And some must crouch beneath the city, fog and all.

There is a place that I remember in San Francisco, beneath the Central Freeway, where steel and concrete pillars form a surreal forest. Those urban trunks support six lanes of

freeway traffic that rumbles incessantly overhead, creating a sonic tunnel below. Another six lanes of city streets stream through that lower acoustic corridor, three on either side of the supporting pillars. The upper freeway traffic is ceaseless; the street traffic below is stop-and-go, interrupted at every block by cross streets and stoplights. The cars and trucks move on, but what they spew has no place to go, and so it stays. Carbon monoxide and diesel smoke and litter fill the artery, trapped among the echoes of car horns, engine revs, and brake squeals.

I remember this place as all shadowy gray. Concrete gray. Broken-glass gray. Last-week's-newspaper gray. A gray "safety island" lay between the three-lane halves of the street under the freeway. Concrete pillars rose on either end of the island, like stiff palm trees for an urban castaway. Beneath one of the pillars was a broken metal folding chair, a filthy pillowcase lumpy with crammed clothing, and a small plastic bucket and an overturned milk crate, both red – the only non-gray in my memory of the place.

And there was a woman. Though she was young, I remember her as being gray, too. Her long hair would have been blond except for the soot. Her clothes might have been colorful except for the dirt and stench; but her skin was probably gray even without the smudges. She had propped a cardboard sign on the broken chair; it wavered in the slipstreams of rushing cars. The handwritten block letters pleaded: *PLEASE HELP, Muther with 3 smal kids!*

She sat on the red milk crate holding the small red bucket, trying to panhandle both sides of the safety island from her plastic perch even though she was barely able to remain upright. She was a heroin user, and had recently mainlined her drug. Dodging traffic, I approached her from behind, then moved around in front so as not to startle her. I brushed broken glass off the concrete, moved her needle to the side, and knelt to look into her heavy-lidded eyes. I told her my name, and that I was a massage therapist. “Would you like for me to massage your neck and shoulders, to get some of the kinks out of them?” I asked.

For a while she stared at me, considering. “How much?” she asked. It was the most frequent question I got in a day.

*“It doesn’t cost anything. I’m just here to massage your back.” Yet it will cost us both dearly. You will have to rummage in your pockets for courage, allowing me to touch you with a tenderness you can’t afford to believe in any more. I will have to pay with eyes that see myself in your gray face. And I’ll try to dig deep, to unfold the currency of enough compassion for us both.*

“Why?” she asked. The second-most frequent question.

*“Because I want to be here with you.” Maybe the “why” is because some part of the Golden Rule is genetically encoded into both of us. But my own answer is more like the mountain-climber’s response: Because you are here, and because I can.*

A motorist stopping for a red light dangled a dollar bill through a one-inch opening in his window; she wobbled up, retrieved it, and sat back down. “Whadda I hafta do?”

“Nothing except sit here. And let me know if anything I do doesn’t feel good.” She studied my eyes as best she could, then moved her left shoulder a few inches toward me, indicating that I could start there. I moved around to stand behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders for a moment so she had a sense of my touch. I breathed in, then pressed my thumbs into those matched points in the trapezius muscle that seem to be the gatekeepers to all of a body’s tensions.

As I kneaded her shoulders and upper arms, she began to relax. Or maybe the heroin was taking her deeper. It didn’t matter. Her eyes were closed when another dollar was offered; I propped her up against my hip and held out her red bucket – wouldn’t want to let one get away. When I cupped her forehead in my left hand and worked the muscles of her neck with my right, a driver stopped and yelled, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m giving her a massage.”

“You’re nuts!” he yelled, and gunned through the green light.

“Thanks for your help,” I said to his taillights.

**TWENTY MINUTES LATER**, my hands gently lifted from her shoulders. The gray woman could barely rouse herself. Helping her to her feet, I gathered her nest egg of alms from the red bucket and stuffed it into her pants pocket. She swayed, and I caught her. I handed her the cardboard sign and her bucket, and crammed the pillowcase into the milk crate, but couldn't manage the broken chair along with the milk crate and the woman. The chair would have to be left behind on the island.

The walk light flashed permission, and I guided the woman to the shore on the other side of the river of traffic. Halfway down the next block there was an empty lot, fenced in with chain-link, with a patch of dry weeds between the fence and the sidewalk. There I put her red crate and her belongings. There I put her, and told her goodbye. There was nothing more I could do to comfort her. It would be several more hours before the heroin left her veins, and the lack would rouse her.

"Thanks," she said. She wanted to say something more, but the words got lost somewhere. So, "Thanks," she said again.

I walked away, toward the gray tunnel of fumes and noise and concrete. That evening's fog was just beginning to spill over the edges of the freeway, chill and damp. Not at all like a comforter.