

My Pack is Heavy But My Heart Is Light

By Susie R. Spann

(Originally published in the San Diego Reader
27 October 2010)

The San Diego Rescue Mission opens its doors to homeless women for a brief time each evening. Only 50 people are allowed inside.

It becomes a race, but one in which the competitors encourage one another. I spot one of the regulars at the shelter sitting by the side of the road. Ellen (not her real name) needs a wheelchair but stubbornly insists on using a cane.

I wave and massage my shoulders discreetly. She does not need to know how badly I am hurting.

I call out, "Hey, Ellen, how are you?"

"Hanging in there, Sue. You?" Her eyes are glazed.

"Doing fine so far." I sit beside her and wipe the sweat from my brow. "When are you going to get a wheelchair?"

"Don't need one. Got my eye on a walker, though." She sighs. "Next month, when my SSI comes in, I'm gonna get it."

"Have you taken anything today?" All I can offer is ibuprofen, but it is buried too deeply in my bag to do much good.

"Yeah, one of the other girls gave me something. She came back from the ER this afternoon with a whole bunch of stuff. I took a pain pill about an hour ago, and a muscle relaxant after that. Can't feel any difference."

Ellen laughed, a rusty croak that comes from one who has lived a hard life.

We met at this shelter. She had been there before, an old pro at the homeless game. I was a newbie.

"Where are you from?" Ellen's voice was strong and jovial, not what I expected to hear in a place full of people at the bottom of the social ladder.

"Originally from Texas," I replied.

I closed the distance between us and offered my hand. She took it, and launched into an explanation.

"They let us in at 5:30, if there's room. You'll have a mattress and linens. You even get a meal and a shower, and clothes if you don't have them. By 9:30 the lights go out and we try to sleep, if the mummies can keep their little ones quiet enough, that is."

“I have my own tent and sleeping bag,” I interjected. “I don’t want to be a burden. I’m just looking for a place out of the weather until I get my situation straightened out.”

Ellen looked at me with kindness but her question was blunt. “What is your situation, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I was raised with an outdated set of beliefs in Grandfalls, Texas. Population in 1985: 600.

In my senior year of high school I maintained a 4.0 GPA, earned the John Philip Sousa Award for Excellence in Music, and won several writing competitions. In my spare time I raised chickens and ducks, toting 50-pound feed bags and repairing pens as needed. I never asked for help. The chickens were as much mine as my grades or my music were. I had been taught that you took care of your own business, but when you saw someone that was just a little worse off than you were, you reached out to help them. That was in a tiny back-water town in West Texas in the 1980s.

My parents grew up in the Great Depression and believed that individuals are responsible for themselves. They had seen the birth of three grandchildren by the time they brought me into the world on April 1, 1967. Daddy was nearing the age when he would have to retire, and money was always tight.

I grew up poor but never realized I was impoverished. We bought food in bulk and froze it. Daddy worked an average of 100 hours every week to save money for the 17-cubic-foot freezer. It took up half of the garage, but that was not a problem. We only had one vehicle and Daddy drove it to work seven days a week. Mother and I walked, whether we were going to the Laundromat or the grocery store. She pulled the handle of the little red wagon Daddy bought me for my fourth birthday. I brought up the rear, guarding the precious cargo of freshly washed laundry or the two bags of groceries. We did not lose a single sock or a potato on my watch. We didn’t have the money for a second vehicle and the idea of applying for a loan was out of the question.

“Don’t buy on credit,” Daddy would growl. “If you don’t have the money for it, you don’t need it.”

I didn’t get a pair of store-bought jeans until I was 10. Mother sewed all of my clothes. “Old-fashioned!” cried my schoolmates in Eden, Texas.

Mother shrugged her shoulders when I cried about the teasing. She did not look at me while she stirred the pot of red beans on the stove.

“They can like it or they can lump it,” she said.

Daddy would just shake his head and order me to ignore it.

My parents had relationship problems a few times in the past, but they always worked it out. By the fall of my senior year the arguing stopped. There was no truce, no settling of differences. Daddy simply left. Mother and I were on our own and struggling to survive. It had been two

decades since Mother had worked. Job opportunities for teenagers in Grandfalls included two months of swimming pool duty for two lifeguards and one concession stand manager, two part-time trash collectors for City Hall, and babysitting. The graduating class of 1985 was huge with nineteen seniors, creating a fierce competition for jobs.

Mother went to the school principal for help and was offered a job as a substitute teacher for \$70 a week. It helped. We could pay the rent on a government-subsidized apartment and only dipped into my college savings account for food and utilities. The damage was done, however. Even with scholarships I would not be able to afford college. I was hurt, desperate, and more determined than before to escape. Then the Marine Corps recruiter marched into Grandfalls-Royalty High School, impressive in his dress blues. I fell for the pitch.

Mother leaned wearily over the sink, washing dishes.

“I can enlist right after my birthday in April, and they can keep me in the delayed-entry program until I finish high school,” I gushed, too excited to hide behind my usual stoic demeanor. “With a guardian signature I can enlist now, even though I’m only 17, but that is a lot of trouble and I can’t go to basic training until after I graduate anyway.”

She only hesitated a moment.

“I’ll sign.”

“No,” I shook my head and tried to keep my eyes steady. “Daddy will not like it, and I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“He lost the right to decide when he left us. I’ll sign.” She planted her hands on her hips. Her mind was made up.

So was mine.

“No, Mother. This is my decision and I want to take full responsibility for it. I need to do this on my own.” I didn’t say please, but she must have seen it in my eyes.

“Okay,” she said after a moment. That was the end of the discussion.

School officials were willing for me to miss two days during the first week of April. My grades were already well above average and I had not used a sick day in a long time. Monday, April 1, 1985, I celebrated my eighteenth birthday by baking and decorating my own cake. On Thursday I flew from Odessa to the military processing center in El Paso. I passed the physical, almost aced the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and raised my right hand for the oath. I was officially property of the United States Marine Corps. The flight back passed in a daze, but on Saturday I marched into the front door of Mother’s house feeling like an adult. I was not prepared for what happened next.

Daddy had come back unexpectedly. He brooded at the kitchen table, his face puckered and set like the mug on a bulldog. He did not say a word when I told him what I had done. Picking up a deck of cards, he shuffled them twice and set out a game of solitaire. I walked to my room and put away my things. The subject never came up between us again.

Summer passed quickly and I left my parents to train at Parris Island, South Carolina. By January 1986 I found myself in Marine Corps green reporting for duty at SOM NAB LCreek NorVA, or the School of Music at Naval Air Base in Little Creek, Virginia. Even though I had my own saxophone, Uncle Sam issued me another one to play. It was six months of music theory, performance, and drills. Small squads were sent out regularly to play at the commissioning or decommissioning of a ship, at a change of command, or at any other ceremony that required music. We had PT every day and rotated guard duty.

It was outstanding.

For a small-town girl, it was also a culture shock. I met people from all over the world. I had a semi-social life. After classes and duty ended many of us would gather at the bowling alley. Some drank beer to relax. I took a book and tried to read.

“Where are you from?”

The voice carried a familiar southern accent. Surprised, I looked up to find a man sporting boots, a western shirt, and a high-and-tight.

“Texas,” I replied. “What about you?”

“Tennessee,” he said. “Want to see a movie?”

“Sure. What’s playing?” I marked my place in my book and stood. We were almost the same height. He seemed harmless enough.

“*Lady and the Tramp*, I think.” He grinned. Even his smile was southern. “There’s not much choice on base and my Nova’s not running right now.”

We left together. We became almost inseparable.

Unfortunately, I depended on him to provide the protection during our more intimate moments. He was not very reliable. Two months before graduation from music school, I learned I was expecting a baby. By the time the pregnancy was confirmed the father had flunked out of his training and was on his way to another base for grunt work. I was on my own.

Military mothers-to-be must sign papers to give over custody of their child to another legal adult in the event of the mother’s death. I had no one to entrust my child to. My parents were too old and my brothers and sisters were caring for their own grandchildren. I turned to a friend I had known since high school and explained the situation to him. He offered to marry me and take care of me and my baby, provided I left the military. After a long and heartbreaking internal debate, I decided to take a medical discharge and return home. My re-enlistment status was 1-A,

verifying that I could join any branch of the military at any time I chose, as long as age and physical ability did not interfere. In my mind I was not turning my back on my future, just reorganizing it. I would have a family first, and then I would have a career.

My dream had already withered. I just didn't know it yet.

I married in October 1986, confident that I could be settled and have a nursery ready for the December delivery date. With help from friends the nursery was ready two weeks before Thanksgiving. My little boy was born on November 24. It was a full week before the due date, but it was two days too late.

My last prenatal check-up was on a Thursday, when the stoop-shouldered country doctor searched for fifteen minutes to find the baby's heartbeat. He claimed he found it, and that nothing was wrong. I believed his assurances that any worries I had were just jitters. That night the baby tossed and tumbled in my belly so forcefully that I could not sleep. It was the last time I felt him move. Late Saturday night in the emergency room an ultrasound verified the tiny heart was not beating. On Sunday afternoon Brian James Spann came into the world feet first and as lifeless as a lump of clay. The following Friday, one day after Thanksgiving, I watched as the tiny box was lowered into the hard Texas ground.

"It's for the best," my family said soothingly.

"There'll be others," my friends consoled me.

I nodded and smiled, thanking the well-wishers as politely as I could. They meant well, even if their words were hollow.

With that tiny wooden coffin I buried my dreams of the military and a career. I tried to forget the past and focused on the future, throwing myself into my new life with a Texas redneck. I milked goats and rushed to help load hay from the fields every time a sudden storm threatened to ruin the bales. Together my husband and I built pens for goats and chickens and rebuilt the living room of a mobile home, sometimes taking a break to go dancing or see a movie. We had three sons who grew to be strong, healthy young men. Between births I wept over the graves of one brother and both of my parents. We struggled through various stages of poor and dirt-poor, somehow managing to survive the heartbreaks that came every year. It was difficult, but I always kept my eye on the future.

Everything changes. I added divorce to my growing list of broken dreams, and I did what I have always done: I survived. I began a nerve-shattering schedule as a full-time parent, full-time employee, and full-time college student.

When my youngest son moved out, I packed and gleefully hopped on a Greyhound to California. In King City, after an exhilarating week camping at the Pinnacles National Monument, I checked into a Motel 6. Somewhere between the front desk and my room I lost my wallet, with all of my money and identification.

I squared my shoulders and searched for a way to recover my identity. A few good Samaritans extended a helping hand, enabling me to find a women's shelter in downtown Los Angeles. I

managed to obtain a copy of my discharge papers proving that I was a United States citizen who had served honorably in the Marine Corps. I also received confirmation that I could register for the summer courses offered by the San Diego Community College District. Patience and perseverance do pay off, eventually.

Gung-ho as ever, I searched for ways to get to San Diego. A search through my Marine green sea-bag turned up a debit card with \$25 on it, just enough for bus fare. At the end of March 2010 I donned my pack and hiked to the bus depot.

I hoist my pack as I look up the steep hill in front of me.

A woman walks by, pushing a loaded cart. I realize it is time to go. Ellen, my homeless friend, struggles to her feet, leaning on her cane. She puts one foot in front of the other carefully. I position myself behind her, my arm ready to catch her if she stumbles. One misstep and she will roll down Elm Street.

We sweat our way up and down the last two blocks and stagger through the gates of the shelter as the sun sets behind us. The streets begin to fill up with men and women. They push their belongings in small grocery carts or drag huge plastic bags behind them. We line up to get a plate of overcooked vegetables and a mystery casserole.

I have met some of San Diego's homeless. We share the pain of our shattered lives. Other people might scowl and curse at the sight of a man digging through a trash can, but I remember Daddy bringing home a crate of vegetables that fell from a truck. Mother cooked enough for supper and canned the rest. It was our life.

Others may cringe when a hunched drifter coughs. I remember the times in my adult life when I have been sick but had no one to nurse me through it. I did all of the nursing for others.

When I was married to a man making good money in the oil fields, I still counted pennies at the end of the month to buy a gallon of milk for my sons. Now I carry change in my pocket, ready to drop it into the hands of those who live on the streets. I cannot casually walk by them and ignore their suffering.

Today I am one of them, but that is about to change.

I march toward the only shelter in town that lets women stay off the streets during the day, but a sound catches my attention. I hear a vehicle slow down on the street to my right. A woman is watching me from her pickup.

"Are you in the military?" she calls out, her big blue pickup truck creeping forward as she keeps pace with me.

"I was." I slow and turn slightly toward her.

"Were you a Marine?"

“Yes.”

“Do you need help?” She drives a little closer to me.

I hesitate only a moment.

“Yes. I do.”

She pulls into the parking lot directly in front of me.

“Get in.”

We eat at Denny’s. I order pancakes and sausage. When I finish eating, only a small dab of syrup clings to the plate.

“Do you know how I recognized you were a Marine?” The woman’s eyes twinkle. I shake my head.

“It was the French braid and sea-bag,” she adds.

I learn that her name is Angelique and that my situation is not new to her: She’s helped at least one other homeless woman. She finds a laundromat and pays for the attendant to wash my clothes while she drives me around the Gaslamp district of San Diego, searching for a suitable Single Room Occupancy (SRO). By the end of the day I have a place to stay and clean clothes. I start working for Angelique, handling reference materials for several San Diego law firms, and I begin two summer classes, one at Mesa and the other at City College.

We also locate a female counselor who deals with veterans.

“Our services focus on veterans with substance-abuse problems,” she tells me. I do not have any addictions. “You aren’t suicidal, are you?” she asks, sounding almost eager.

I reply firmly that I am mentally stable and thereby disqualify myself completely from any assistance.

Further inquiries in person at the Veterans Administration yield the same answers, but I am offered a list of cheap hotels. When the accommodations provided by my guardian angel-turned-boss become too expensive, I move down the VA list. Now I am bouncing from one hotel to another due to residency regulations and cleanliness of the bathrooms. I scan the newspapers regularly for other options and one article catches my eye. It describes an annual gathering to provide services to homeless veterans. Stand Down 2010 is the break I need.

On the hottest weekend of the summer I set out, the sun burning my arms and soaking my shirt with sweat. Counted in city blocks the distance is relatively short, but half of it is uphill. At last I arrive at a tall gate guarded by a half-dozen tough-looking men and women. Some of them are in military uniforms, and some are in civilian clothing. One muscle-bound man in an orange safety vest stops me as I try to enter.

“Are you a veteran?” he asks, eyeing my hat.

“Yes, I am.”

His eyes remain fixed on the blue cap I have worn since my son’s graduation from basic training at Lackland Air Force Base. Beneath the Air Force insignia on the front are the words, Proud Mom.

“My son is an airman,” I explain, smiling. “He is stationed in Oklahoma. I served in the Marines a long time ago.”

The man in the orange vest does not let me pass. I reach into my pocket and pull out the copy of my discharge papers.

“OK,” he says, then barks out instructions. “Put your gear over there in that pile under the trees. Then go to the first table and register for a tent. Once you have a tent assignment, see your tent leader. She’ll get you taken care of.” I resist the urge to salute.

Behind me I hear raised voices as another street person is interrogated. His shoulder blades are visible through the filthy green shirt he wears.

“But I was told that this is for all the homeless,” he wails.

My heart aches for him, but I cannot help. He is not a veteran and I am out of resources.

With military precision I am assigned to Alpha tent and then directed to a series of stations. That weekend, I submitted the final paperwork to obtain a California ID card. I receive medical and dental check-ups and have a dermatologist examine a few spots on my arms. Other than a mild sunburn, I am given a clean bill of health.

The camaraderie I feel over the course of the weekend will remain in my heart forever. I have not felt that unity since I left the Marines in 1986. Small towns in Texas take care of their own, but often the women who have taken time out of their lives to serve in the military are pushed away from the social circles. At Stand Down, I am not just accepted, I am embraced. My heart soars. I remember who I am. Some dreams are behind me, but others still lie ahead, waiting to be fulfilled. I cherish the ties to my sisters-in-arms.

On Sunday afternoon, the women of Alpha tent lead a parade of almost 1000 homeless veterans, marching to the gate that leads back to the street. Some veterans, those who have had addictions in the past, pile into vans that take them to Veterans Village of San Diego. A few others are taken in by a shelter in Ocean Beach, and those who remain enter a shelter in downtown San Diego. I am lucky enough to be placed for a short time in St. Vincent de Paul’s. Unfortunately, the tight regulations at the shelter conflict with my ability to devote full attention to my studies. I am faced with another difficult decision.

Again Angelique comes to my rescue, informing me that the other woman working for her has retired. I can have more hours, if I want them. With a sigh of relief I accept the offer and after only ten days at St. Vincent de Paul’s I have enough saved to procure another place near City College. I can even budget for food and a few other necessities.

Once more I put on my pack and march forward. It is still heavy. But my heart is light, singing with the promise that someday I will go on camping vacations of my choice, rather than trudging along Elm Street with my life in a bag.