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A Musician Friend Comes In From the Cold

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Points West

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It was just after midnight and I was worried.

I'd heard that Nathaniel, my homeless friend, had been more aggressive of late in downtown Los Angeles. Ernest Adams, who camps near Nathaniel, had told me he saw him get into a nasty argument with a Nathaniel's usual spot in the 2nd Street tunnel, and now I feared the worst.

So on Monday night I drove to Nathaniel's usual spot in the 2nd Street tunnel, and now I feared the worst.

No shopping cart. No violins and cellos. No Nathaniel. All I saw were his chalked scrawls on the pavement.

First thing Tuesday morning I called Stuart Robinson at Lamp, the skid row agency that has spent months scheming with me to try to help Nathaniel push past his fears and get off the streets. Not only was I worried sick, but I had a few birthday cards to pass along to him. On Tuesday, Nathaniel turned 55.

Any sign of him? I asked Robinson.

"Yeah," he said. "He's right here."

Whewwwwwwwww!

You have any idea where he was last night? I asked.

"Yes," said Robinson. "He spent the night in his apartment."

I was driving on Sunset Boulevard and had to pull over.

"Are you kidding?" I asked.

"No," Robinson said with a sly chuckle.

After I don't know how many years of sleeping on the streets, he'd woken up in a bed. On his birthday, no less. The apartment had been held for Nathaniel because Robinson and others thought he was getting close to making a move. Nathaniel had hung posters in there, set family photos on the dresser and stuck a bust of his one true god — Beethoven — in a corner.

He had taken cello lessons in the room, calling it his studio, but he had not spent a single evening in it before Monday. My next strategy was going to be to ask him to give me a violin lesson some night in the apartment and then keep him awake until he collapsed.

Now I wouldn't have to.

"I don't believe it," I said to Robinson.

"You want to come see him?" he asked.

Come see him? I wanted to hire a float and put him in a parade. If he weren't two years older than I am, I'd adopt him.

The small group of us who know Nathaniel have been waiting, wondering, hoping. I, being the most impatient one in the bunch, had wondered if he needed more of a push and had even suggested that involuntary treatment might be the way to go. Just last week, the Wall Street Journal profiled a controversial psychiatrist known for preaching forced treatment.

But Robinson and the experts at Lamp had insisted Nathaniel had to make his move in his own time, when he finally trusted us and overcame his fear of so dramatic a change. If we push too hard, they said, we may push him away for good.

What a waste that would have been.

In the beginning, Nathaniel refused to even visit Lamp, and then he became a regular. He made a lot of other leaps forward too. He visited Disney Hall to hear the L.A. Philharmonic. He began taking lessons from Peter Snyder, a cellist in the orchestra, hoping to move toward his dream of playing as well as he did while at Juilliard more than 30 years ago, when schizophrenia hit. Lately, he's been asking Snyder if they could shoot for a recital together at Carnegie Hall.

And now he has spent a night indoors.

"This is three miracles in one week," said Brady Westwater, a downtown Los Angeles activist and lifesaver — once homeless himself — who has been even busier than usual lately.

The two of us had cajoled Adams into a doctor's visit, he being the man who was nearly beaten to death last year by two young men on a bum-bashing rampage. By week's end, Westwater was making arrangements to get Adams — on the street for eight years — indoors over the next few weeks.

Then there was 31-year-old Kellie from New York, whose mother got hold of me in desperation last week. The daughter was severely mentally ill, said the mother, and was believed to be somewhere on L.A.'s skid row without her medication.

Westwater posted fliers, found people who had seen Kellie, and traced her to Arizona. By Thursday, Kellie had been reunited with her family back East.

Westwater insisted the week's lesson is that even the most troubled people can be saved if someone is pulling for them, there's a database on lost souls (like the one he keeps informally), and the service agencies work together. Such a recipe would have a huge impact on skid row, across the county and beyond.

As for Nathaniel, it isn't clear what finally brought him around last week. After dinner Monday night at Lamp, he dropped his head from exhaustion and told Robinson he wasn't up for the nightly one-mile trek to his post at the west end of the 2nd Street tunnel.

"Can I stay in my room tonight?" he asked.

Robinson was thrilled, but didn't turn cartwheels. He played it cool, as if Nathaniel's request was a perfectly natural progression.

"Sure," Robinson said.

Nathaniel pushed his shopping cart, which contains two violins, two cellos and everything else he owns, around the block and into the apartment complex. A Lamp aide watched him go inside and shut the door.

Good night.

"I was worried I wouldn't be able to hear any of the street noises I like," Nathaniel told me the next day. "But I heard planes and sirens, and the faucet dripped all night. It was great."

The best thing about staying in the room, he said, was soaking his feet, taking a hot shower and washing all the bugs out of his clothes.

Later in the week, Robinson told Nathaniel the room didn't come without some responsibility. He had to be a man of integrity and honor his word, and that meant signing a contract to commit to the room for at least three nights a week initially.

Nathaniel picked Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

On Tuesday night, he slept on the street.

On Wednesday night, he slept in his room again.

He skipped Thursday night but was back inside Friday, keeping up his end of the deal.

He has a long way to go, of course. He still hears voices in his head. He wears strange turban-like get-ups. He shifts mid-sentence from "canine investigators," or his new identity as "Mr. White," to detailed descriptions of his performances at the Aspen Music Festival.

But maybe the apartment will become his home, and maybe he'll get psychiatric treatment, and maybe, and maybe, and maybe.

"I think there's something in him that wants to do this," Robinson said.

I've seen it.

In the past year, I've seen a lot of things in Nathaniel's eyes. Confusion, clarity, rage, compassion, fear and utter joy.

I have never seen defeat.