

Life with the trolls



Chip Scheuer

Sentinel reporter Paul Beatty, left, Gerald and others enjoy the sun at the Transit Center.

Last of four articles

By PAUL BEATTY
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SANTA CRUZ — I can do only one more day of this.

I wanted to spend six days on the streets as a "troll," but something in me is being hurt. I've had enough.

Six days will have to be cut to four. I'll quit Monday.

Do one more night and tomorrow go to the Catholic Soup Kitchen for the fun of surprising Sister Grace. Then I'll do the one thing the others on the street can't do — pick up and go home.

I'll drive off in my new car to a clean house with beds and a full refrigerator and a wife who can cook in Danish when she's of a mind.

One more day in the park. Another meal at the Elm Street Mission. I'll sleep in a troll camp tonight. Then I'm getting out.

One more day.

* * *

Sunday morning and the little bit of poetry I have left has me scribbling some Venusian nonsense about San Lorenzo Park being re-born each dawn and losing its innocence a thousand times each day.

I'm alone, sitting down at the foot of the park, soaking up sunshine, listening to the ducks concluding a conversation they began in the Garden of Eden. It

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reminds me I will soon be at the Democratic convention.

I'm waiting for the street people to arrive from their sleeping places to fill the park with their gossip and free enterprise.

These early hours give me time to log my experiences. This morning my reflections are disturbing, the images dark. I should be in a good mood; I'm getting out and going home tomorrow. There's an elusive uneasiness in this open city park.

A young man wanders in and I recognize him as one of the street people who sat among our group of "trolls" under the sycamore Saturday.

We're tagged "trolls" because many of us sleep under the bridges. Too, we go about quietly scouring the city for food and people have the idea that trolls do that. The name "trolls" originated in the outside world, but it is tolerated among the street people I met.

The young wanderer is dressed like a high school kid, trucker-type cap and Nikes. He's 19 and in rough shape this morning.

"I took some peyote last night," he boasted, "but it wasn't very good and I've been up all night."

He starts an emotional merry-go-round of "I've got to find a way to get off the streets . . . I've got to get off the streets . . . to get off the streets."

Three years back, he was an A-student in computer science at a local high school. His father brought home a computer and the two of them got good enough to do their own programming. There's a sound of deep loss in his voice as he tells me.

Something went wrong. Instead of a diploma, he picked up a couple of felonies, he said.

He's never looked for work, but he's

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compelled this morning to get off these streets. "I have a big chance. A guy told me he might hire me as a dishwasher if I came in this morning. I've got to get that job to get off the streets."

For a moment, I am looking at my own son — same school, same teacher, same early talent. My kid, although he may not believe this, took the easy route by going to college.

Kid, I tell him, you can get the job and get off the streets. Make a commitment to yourself. Refuse to stay on the streets. Believe in yourself.

He takes the old wino's words to heart and goes off in good spirits to get the job.

A group of rowdy dead-heads comes into the park, back from the Grateful Dead concert in Sacramento last night.

I hear sirens and one of the deads is yelling at me to tell the cops that "a guy just ran out of the park, over that hill."

It takes me a moment to understand he wants me to be his alibi. I tell him OK, but instead of thanking me, he calls me one of the obscenities that my generation went to war over. I miss the good old days.

John comes in. He was in jail again last night, but thinks he has a job.

Someone wants to hire him to watch over an acre of marijuana in Humboldt County. He'll get food and all the "bud" he can smoke. Good, I tell him, for idle hands are the devil's playground. He

laughs.

I move up to the sycamore tree to spend the day.

I begin to sort out my notes about my few days on the street. People, places and things. The park lays out before me and I look up from my notes. Then, I am crying.

The kid comes back. He didn't get the job....

Gerald, my friend and a man who is called the mayor of the Mall, asks me later if I was crying for him.

For you, I tell him, and the women who have no homes and the kid who will never get out of the park and the alkies and the hunger and digging in garbage cans and the children I've seen at the soup kitchen.

And, because I have to eat another mission sandwich.

Gerald and I kick back and listen to KHIP playing two of my favorites: "You Hurt Me Like a Punch in The Mouth," and "The Tires Were Slashed and I Almost Crashed." They don't write songs like that anymore, I pray.

I don't like to use the park restroom. The doors have been removed from the stalls — at least in the men's room — to stop sexual encounters. It partially works.

The Backgammon Man has opened shop and there's a little game going on that's invisible to the civilized eye. He lights one of his incense sticks. A transient comes by, telling us he got his

blaster for \$12 in food stamps. It is always explained whether the purchase is in stamps or cash. Everyone tells the proud buyer that he got a great deal. I'm certainly impressed when he says it doesn't have an antenna and can't get KHIP.

I recall an incident yesterday when two young lumberjacks on the footbridge told us, "Get back in the park, trolls, or I'll kick your ass."

I am complaining about having to pay our dues at the mission by having to listen to a sermon and Gerald patiently explains, "That's how missions work." It's part of the deal.

He's agreed to let me spend the night at his camp.

Time down here is played at 78 rpms — slow-motion reels where a day spent to get a meal at the mission isn't a bad deal.

In the afternoon, Gerald and I walk to the Mall. "I hate the weekends," he says. "They're even slower than the weekdays."

Gerald says the Mall "is also part of my living room," but he doesn't have a kitchen — except for a few braziers at the park.

He spends his food stamps for lunch stuff and junk food, a cuisine that is a cut below the Top Ramen diet on campus.

We drift down Pacific Avenue to Elm Street where we meet a couple of panhandlers who get into an argument.

"I was working this corner first." They settle the argument by going into competition. It works well, the oncoming public has no room to slip by and gets to pick which one to refuse.

A young man tells us that Jesus will say to the rich, "Did you feed this man and did you give him a home and the rich man will say 'no, Lord, he was just a street troll' and Jesus will kick his butt all over heaven."

There's bragging of the number of years we've all been on the streets. I don't dare say "three days."

At the mission, a rangy biker orders the handsome young woman hanging on him to get more bread from the missionaries. "I've got plenty for us, honey," she says, showing him the bread cached in her blouse. "Go get more," he orders her.

At least my friends have enough pride to do their own begging.

It's time to call it a day so Gerald and I head over to pick up my blankets from my "camp" in my daughter's yard.

Gerald likes to stop at Denny's for a late cup of coffee, but I'm ashamed to go into such a fine place carrying this black garden-bag full of blankets. I talk him into having a cup of daughter Tove's coffee. It's good, but Gerald misses his cream.

Night has arrived and we leave.

I pictured Gerald's camp as a good buddy to Boy Scout camps: marshmallows toasting while we sing a

long as the friendly little woods creatures watch in good spirits.

We step off the shoulder of the highway and feet-feel our way down an embankment. Tricky in the dark with this dumb bag, in these ugly clothes (thank God for these ugly clothes in the cold nights, you ingrate) to a small path that leads to the towering trees. There is eerie rustling overhead.

Gerald says the first "camp" is his. As well as I can make it out, it is a five-by-seven-foot clearing in the brush. The breeze is up a little and it sounds an undertone to the hum of traffic on the freeway. All night, car lights play tricks in the darkened upper branches.

A few feet down is my "camp." Gerald's "camp" is slightly bigger, but it's his place and he gets the master bedroom.

I'm not too happy about this. Gerald assures me the authorities won't raid us and that there haven't been any animals around for a long time.

"And that long stick in there is to drive away the unwanted."

What am I doing here? In a den, under the night bushes, where I need a five-foot piece of wood to defend a bit of ground so I can sleep. I can't make sense of it.

Gerald turns in and I arrange my blankets and lie down, looking up into the overhead branches and beyond to the stars. The fog is hours away.

Nearly asleep.

I hear voices. Heavy voices. At least two men are coming down the path.

"Here's the place," one says right outside my burrow.

They've stopped. They're coming in. Enough.

I've reached my limit — three days of shame, moving out of civilized people's way, listening to losers and bleeding for them and grubbing off the backside of life ...

That's enough.

I grab the stick, shake off the bedding and get to my knees in absolute silence.

A blinding heat consumes my mind and screams, "Come on in here, you SOBs! come on in."

If they do, I will kill them if I can.

"I thought we were going to the old camp," one complains, and they move on.

The next day, Gerald asks me, "Did you hear those guys come down?"

It is dawn and I get out. Leaving Gerald, I go to the park for the last day.

It is unchanged.

Kill the morning, a trip to the Mall where a merchant sweeps around us with glowering looks. Gerald says hello to a couple of people.

At the soup kitchen, Sister Grace can't believe I've been on the streets and calls me her brother. It reminds me of when I told John to do some good for himself, and he said, "I love you, man."

I walk out to the curb and wait for my wife.