

Benjamin Joe

Bedbugs

The park was filled with bedbugs.

They were all over the evening news. The residents blamed the homeless population. These idlers had taken over the park for as long as anyone could remember, said the neighborhood. From November till February the snowbirds were rushing to the desert city and they brought whatever they carried with them. Outside, the natives railed mightily with conviction. Inside though, they felt like they were beating a dead horse. I was a college student going to Arizona University.

“I shouldn’t have left her. She was my sweetheart.”

The old man looked at the ground. Above him was the underside of a bridge. Below him a pile of blankets. Maybe they’d have to be burned. Maybe he deserved to be burned. That was his point, I think. I’d stayed there under the bridge with him and that earned some sincerity, apparently. I watched the old man crawl out of his skin, to bare himself under my gaze.

He’d been coming to Tucson for a long time. Everyone knew him. Sometimes he’d skip a year but mostly he’d end up in the city while it was still cool enough to inhabit. He was known to stir up trouble. He was a rabble rouser. A self-confirmed red. He’d hang around the parks and corners. I’d introduced myself at one of those corners and made a request to see how he lived. I’d been told he was a real inspiration.

“Sure kid,” he said, spitting loudly before agreeing. “You got it, you gotta get it!”

He was a real character.

“The world for the laborer is receding,” he said then. “Somewhere, something or someone has pulled the wool over the eyes of the worker.”

Animated, head jutting out as he spoke, bent over slightly, knee pressing back and forth in the desert air, he honed his rallying cry while keeping his eyebrows furrowed on a distant point on the horizon. He always had a joint he said he was going to smoke, but never did.

“This exodus just confirms the position from the locals,” he continued, looking down with a pious expression for a moment. “We have to fight back with our own paradigm!”

He was talking about oppression and scams pulled throughout the world. A travesty of lies that he had been chosen to fight against. But not today. Not now.

“She was the one,” he said under the bridge, away from his audience, clutching his fingers on the blanket and looking down again with blue eyes. The sunlight was angling its way along the bottom of the subterranean structure. Despite the shade, we knew we had to leave. The cops were just begging to bust him on an offense, he said, and he’d only be arrested on violation of marijuana laws.

“Yeah, kid,” he said, holding a paper to roll a cigarette, rolling his fear and regret as surely as the cancerous fibers. “Don’t let love slip away.”

Outside the day was getting hot, and the homeless who’d allegedly infested the park were walking the main strip looking for work to get some money and leave Tucson. The world watched a previously useless portion

of the population suddenly rise up and join the local economy. The old man said he was going up north to see friends. He said it in an easy way, but from the look he gave me, it was like he was trying to confirm something that I had no right to judge.

“I hope I’m not...” he stopped suddenly, then pulled the last words, ‘too late,’ back to his chest. “I hope I’m not carrying any bugs.”

I went to my dormitory, still picturing him, talking to his shadow, making gestures with his cigarette. For some reason, I saw a bit of a hopeful smile that had been nonexistent in his tearful confession as well as in his daytime bravado for the revolution, a smile that told me that maybe, just maybe I’d never see him again. That he wasn’t ‘too late.’

I wished him well, stripped down and bagged up my clothes to leave in a trash barrel downstairs. I felt good, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to get bugs.