

The Sprawl

Harrison Potts

The following story is not an all-encompassing portrayal of the housing crisis in America. This story is only one of many.

The city loomed, a cluster of concrete and steel, indifferent to the lives contained within it. A homeless man, known to few as Eli, wandered its streets, features beaten by years of half-survival. His world was one of alleys that the sun barely touched and into which the wind delivered whispers of despair.

Eli's days began with the struggle to open his eyes against the crust of sleep and grime. He'd push himself from the damp cardboard that served as his bed and shiver in the early morning chill. His stomach growled, but hunger had become a familiar enemy. Its consistency was the only thing that could be guaranteed.

The market street was alive with people, a river of bustling steps and averted gazes. Eli moved through them, a specter in ragged cloth, his hand outstretched for spare change. Most ignored him, some muttered curses under their breath. The few coins he managed to collect jingled in his frayed pocket as he walked like a mournful, mocking song.

By midday, he'd find himself in the park, a patch of green amidst the gray. Other lost people gathered there, their faces reflecting a vast range of emotions. They shared stories of better days, lies mostly, each trying to outdo the other in the grandeur of their imagined past lives. Eli listened, silent, knowing his truth was too bitter for him to enunciate.

Danger was never far. That afternoon, it came in the form of a wiry, balding man with a crazy look.

They called him Rat for his tendency to scavenge through the dumpsters with a frenzy that bordered on madness. Rat had taken a liking to Eli's spot under the old oak tree, and today he intended to claim it.

"You got no right to sit there," Rat snarled, his voice a threat. "That's *my* place."

Eli looked up, weary but defiant. "Ain't nobody's place but where they sit. And I sit here."

A twisted smile came across Rat's face. It was what Eli imagined the devil's grin would look like.

Rat lunged, a flash of steel in his hand. Eli felt the blade before he saw it, a sharp, screeching pain between his ribs. He reached out and grabbed Rat, grappled him to the ground, their bodies a tangle of desperate limbs. Out of this cacophony, the knife was knocked away. A punch to Rat's jaw sent his skinny body sprawling. Eli, clutching his bleeding side, stood over him.

"Next time, you best kill me," Eli said, his voice a low growl. Rat scurried away, leaving Eli to nurse his wound. Blood seeped through his fingers, a dark red cloud spreading into the filthy layers of fabric.

The park's shantytown offered little sympathy. They watched with indifferent eyes, each consumed by their own suffering and the misery of all the world. Eli staggered to the small public restroom and cleaned his wound as best as he could. The agony was sharp and unyielding, a reminder of the thin line between life and death in this world. The opening

was shallow and thin: whatever shiv Rat had used was handmade and ineffective—for killing, at least. It was plenty effective for pain.

Leaving the bathroom, the late afternoon welcomed Eli back to the oak tree where he closed his eyes under the cracked and polluted sky.

As night fell, the city transformed. The streets became a labyrinth, shadows hiding threats both real and hallucinated. The police prowled, their presence a constant reminder of the world's desire to spit on those who made the ground their home.

Eli encountered officers often, their tasers and nightsticks instruments of a sadistic authority. Tonight was no different. He was resting on the trunk of his spot, the pain in his side an aching throb when they found him. He had forgotten to move into an alley before the fall of darkness.

"Hey! You can't sleep here," one of the officers barked.

Eli didn't move, too tired to argue, too hurt to care. The officer's boot connected with the ribs on his unwounded side in a blunt burst of pain that forced a groan from his lips.

"I said, get up!"

Eli struggled to his feet, each motion a fresh anguish. The two officers watched, their eyes cold and hard.

Just another piece of trash to be cleared away.

"Where am I supposed to go?" Eli asked, his voice hoarse.

"Not our problem," the officer replied, shoving him out of the park. "Move along."

Eli stumbled into the night, holding both sides of his abdomen, each footstep a feat of will. He found himself near the river, the water an inky, silent witness. He collapsed on the bank, too weak to go further. The city's lights flickered in the distance, phosphene reminders of the world that had forgotten him.

He lay there, the cold seeping into his bones, and thought of the life he once had.

My momma held me once. In her arms. I had a momma once.

Morning came slowly, the sky breaking with another day. Eli forced himself up, driven by the primal itch to survive. An itch that he cursed. He made his way back to the market street, hoping for a few more coins, a scrap of food, something to stave off the merciless end.

As he walked, he saw the world through cloudy eyes that had not known sleep in so long. The people moved past him, their lives untouched, the shelters too full, the soup kitchens too far. When Eli used to pray, he used to pray for mercy.

Used to.

In the end, he was another lost soul in the city's vast expanse: one of many, one of none. A void testament, a tune sung silently, ghost among shadows, forever wandering.