

Islanders

by *Richard Risemberg*

A golden haze lay over Hollywood, illuminated by the rising sun. From a high window, you would see buildings lifting through the mists: offices, expensive condominium towers: isolated in clusters among the older apartments of the side streets. But at ground level what you saw were the tent camps of the homeless: nylon islands in a sea of trash. Scattered here and there, around the new developments, were smaller sound stages, a lumberyard and nursery, two bigbox stores in a glittering complex, tiny storefronts housing everything from machine shops to ninety-nine seat theaters, that sort of thing. Of course there were taquerias, doughnut shops, and the occasional chef-led restaurant on a main street, safely ensconced in a strip mall by a dry cleaner and a florist. There was a post office, there was a graffiti-smearred recreation center with a pool and tennis courts, and there was a farmers' market on Sundays, held on a blocked-off street near a bookstore specializing in architecture. And there was murder.

Perhaps we are being unjust in calling it murder: disputes arose, tempers got the better of the disputants, and knives or guns appeared to mediate contention. When the inhabitants of the tent camps fought and died, the more elevated residents responded not with pity but outrage. And so it was when a tweaker met his end at the barrel of an ancient .38: Ilse Kovak shot him to protect the serenity of the six squares of sidewalk she called home and shared with her autistic boyfriend, Adam Roberts. The tweaker died, unmourned and nameless. He had, according to neighbors, repeatedly assaulted the couple, for reasons unknown perhaps even to himself. Ilse had warned him, had even shown him the gun. He had persisted. Ilse had grown up poor in eastern Europe and had suffered greatly in escaping to the fair shores of the land that calls itself America, where she eventually came to Hollywood; there, instead of comfort, she found the streets. And she found Adam, whose care became her life's purpose. She was, she later said, protecting him. But the police captured her, and left Adam on the street with his tattered blankets and his little battery-powered radio. And the neighbors scowled from their high windows overlooking it all.

Adam and Ilse were not young: certainly in their fifties if not older, though it was hard to tell. Life on the streets ages people considerably beyond their years. Adam's hair was white, although he somehow kept it trimmed short and almost stylish; Ilse's was gray, her face soft. Adam shaved once a week with a disposable razor, scraping his stubble without bothering to wet it. His face was burned and scabbed from the sun. His clothes were dirty but not torn; he exhibited a certain half-hearted fastidiousness, doing what he could to look neat and feel warm. His campsite, even after Ilse was taken away, was never surrounded by trash as so many others were. However, he had no apparent qualms about defecating in full view of the public on a busy street, an act for which he removed his trousers entirely, and carefully wiped himself, his skinny legs straddled apart, while pedestrians hurried past him with strained faces. In part this was the result of the local merchants refusing to let him use their restrooms—though they certainly took his money when he bought food or batteries. The other homeless folks of the neighborhood were more discreet as far as their bodily functions were concerned, though their campsites were slovenly compared to Adam's. When Ilse was with him, she slept in her car, where, she said, Adam resolutely refused to join her. No one in the neighborhood knows what happened to her car, her one valuable possession. But two or three neighbors have been following the progress of her court case and checking up on Adam.

Dorothy is one of those neighbors. She is a middle-aged woman, younger than Ilse, certainly, and probably younger than Adam. She happened to be coming out of the supermarket when Ilse finally lost patience, or was overcome by fear, and shot the tweaker. She saw it all in profile, as if it played out on a television screen, though the sound of the shot startled her, and she dropped her grocery bag. Gunfire is much louder in real life than it is onscreen. Dorothy did not fear for herself, although she should have, with Ilse still holding the .38 and quite obviously tense. As Dorothy approached Ilse, wanting to comfort her, she saw Ilse suddenly break out of her rigid pose and clamber into her car, which was of course cluttered with her worldly goods. Ilse drove off in a rush as Dorothy came upon the little encampment to find the tweaker writhing on the sidewalk, and Adam sitting cross-legged on his faded blanket and staring dully across the street. A bag of tortilla chips lay in his lap, and his tiny radio continued to play a tune popular in the 1960s, to which Dorothy silently sang along, unconscious of doing so. She was among the first on the scene, but a crowd soon gathered, cellphones came out, and several persons called the emergency services number at once, while others photographed the scene: Adam impassive on his blanket, the tweaker bleeding from his abdomen only two steps away, still twitching. Sirens sounded, an ambulance and several cop cars arrived, and black uniforms swarmed. Stern-faced men and women shouted orders at the passersby. One asked Dorothy if she had seen what happened. She answered Yes. The cop gestured her aside to a quieter spot and interviewed her. The ambulance attendants took away the tweaker, who died that night.

Adam sat impassively on his blanket while this was going on. The detective who arrived shortly afterwards attempted to interview him, but soon realized that he would not gain much from the effort. Dorothy did overhear Adam saying that Ilse was his girlfriend, and she suddenly realized that these were the first words she had heard him utter. With the tweaker gone, everyone was standing around Adam, who stared through the forest of restless legs with a sort of despairing expression on his face, or so Dorothy judged it to be. A television news crew arrived, and two persons advanced. They appeared to be from the newspaper, as one carried several still cameras and both had plastic badges hanging around their necks. The news crew left rather soon; with Ilse and the bleeding tweaker gone there was no spectacle to record. The newspaper reporter approached Dorothy, and she repeated what she had told the cop and the detective. More neighbors arrived, but others began to drift away. An old man Dorothy knew from her building approached her and announced that he had heard the shot but had not seen anything, and did she know what had happened? She repeated her story for the fourth time. By now everyone was ignoring Adam, except a woman that Dorothy had seen walking past her building almost every morning; she knelt by Adam to talk with him. Dorothy waited quietly, trading sentence fragments with the old man, who soon left, until the woman finished talking with Adam. Dorothy gestured to her. They knew each other by sight but had to introduce themselves. The woman who had spoken to Adam was called Marlene. She was young, or youngish: not yet thirty, by Dorothy's guess, tawny-skinned with wild dark hair and what Dorothy referred to in her mind as "an honest face." She asked Marlene: "Did he talk to you? He's never talked to me."

"Yes, he's talked with me. But only when Ilse was there. She could get him to loosen up a bit. Even smile. When all these cops clear out, let's try to talk with him. I found a social worker I can call in who can help him. Or so she said."

"But, won't they have a social worker here today? To help him?"

Marlene looked at her sidewise. "You expect a bit too much of this city, don't you?"

"But they always say—they have numbers—"

"Have you tried calling one?"

Dorothy drooped. "All I got was voicemail. Day after day."

Marlene smiled and hugged herself. "So we'll wait."

After the first fifteen minutes, no one official spoke with Adam. Adam stared across the street at nothing, waiting. The two women waited. Eventually the suits and uniforms cleared out, while word passed around the gathered neighbors that Ilse had been arrested a few miles down the boulevard. "And where would she go anyway," Marlene muttered. Finally only the two women and the manager of the market nearby were left. The manager said, "They always came in for food. Never bought booze that I saw. She was good for him. He was a getting little cleaner. The other manager wouldn't let him in before that girlfriend showed up, he smelled so bad. But everybody's gotta eat. I told him he could come in right after we opened, when there wasn't too many customers yet. The poor guy. And now that girlfriend's gonna be in jail." The manager excused himself and returned to the store. Only a couple of neighbors remained. Marlene led Dorothy to Adam's blanket. The little radio was still playing hits of the Sixties. Adam was slowly pulling tortilla chips from the bag on his lap, eating them one at a time.

Dorothy and Marlene approached him. He continued eating his tortilla chips while staring across the street at the blank wall of the drugstore opposite. Marlene crouched down by him, while Dorothy stood, unsure of herself. She heard Marlene murmur, "Adam, are you all right? Do you understand what just happened?"

Adam seemed to ignore her while she repeated the question, then finally murmured: "When will she come back?" He did not look Marlene in the eye. Dorothy felt a strange nervousness watching them. Marlene continued to repeat her question, in a softer voice each time; sometimes Adam would answer, again asking when Ilse would return, but usually he said nothing. Finally Marlene said, "We'll be back, Adam? Okay?" Adam did not answer. Marlene stood up with a mild groan. She gestured to Dorothy to follow her and led her across the street and into the drugstore. There, among the bottles and jars of cosmetics gleaming under strident lighting, she said, "I had to stop. I was feeling myself become impatient. We have to be gentle with him, or he clams up."

"He clammed up anyway, didn't he?"

Marlene grimaced. "Yes. Well, the situation, of course. Who wouldn't be distressed. We'll try again tomorrow. You'll help me, won't you? For as long as it takes?"

"Of course," Dorothy said. They exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet at the corner near Adam's camp the next morning, which was a Saturday. Dorothy asked, "What if he's moved on?" But Marlene reminded her that he had been in the same two-block area for several years, including the time before Ilse. The two women hugged each other and went their ways. Both lived in small apartment buildings a block away from the scene, around the corner from each other.

The next morning they met as planned. When they arrived at Adam's camp, they felt a glimmer of hope, as several official-looking persons stood around him with clipboards, while one, a kindly-looking woman in her forties, knelt and spoke with him. Marlene took one of the clipboard-bearers aside and interrogated her. She then reported to Dorothy, who stood a few steps away. "He is refusing to go to a shelter with them. He has had bad experiences in shelters. At least that's how she said it sounded. They're from some private group, one of those nonprofits. Let's wait a bit."

They waited several bits, while the clipboard-bearers and the kindly woman conferred. The kindly woman spoke to Adam again, and they all crowded into a small white car with a logo on the door and went away. Marlene signaled to Dorothy, and they approached Adam. "I'm sorry to bother you again so soon after those others, but I want to see how you feel."

Adam spoke past them: "Where is Ilse? They didn't know. Do you know?"

"I don't know, Adam. But I will try to find out. I'll come back with news. I hope."

Adam only repeated, "Where is Ilse?" He looked past them at the blank side of the drugstore. Dorothy noted that he had apparently relieved himself against a wall nearby; a puddle flowed slowly towards the gutter. Marlene reported her conversation to Dorothy and said, "We'd better try later. That crew kind of wore him out, I think. I'll call the police and the courts on Monday and try to find out about Ilse. It won't be easy. I've been through that before, when my brother was doing drugs. Can you meet me here Tuesday morning? Are you free?"

"I can make time. I'll be here. Does he need anything? Food? Water?"

"That, he's been getting with no trouble. I'm not sure he wants what he needs. But we gotta try."

Dorothy agreed, and they parted. It was certain that Adam would be in his spot on Tuesday. He was reliable that way.

He was indeed reliable that way. He was also reliable in his unwillingness, or inability, to help Marlene and Dorothy help him. Though for a while, under Ilse's influence, he would engage in small talk for brief moments, and even smile, now he was able only to ask when Ilse would return. The two women followed him into the market once, and observed him interacting verbally with the cashier, who evidently knew him or was at least familiar with his presence.

He did not smile during the interaction. He returned to his camp, the six squares of sidewalk in the afternoon shade of the market's blank east wall, where he turned on his radio and began to eat from a bag of cut broccoli, ignoring, or seeming to ignore, Dorothy and Marlene. This pattern continued for several weeks, with Dorothy also attempting to engage the city bureaucracy purportedly established to help persons such as Adam. The bureaucracy, however, was overwhelmed, and devoted its time, she was told at last, to more cooperative individuals. She was referred to the same nonprofit which she had encountered with Marlene on the day after the shooting. Adam retreated more and more from contact with others. He began to smell worse as well, even though a trailer with showers and a washer and dryer appeared only a block away every Friday. Then Marlene's job necessitated that she spend three weeks in another city on a project. Dorothy had come to depend on her assertiveness in their quest to help Adam, and now felt lost herself. She visited Adam every three or four days during that time, but he would not speak with her. She waited anxiously for Marlene to return. But Marlene did not call her for a week after her expected return date, and then told her that she would have to leave town again, as her mother was dying. They did not see each other during Marlene's brief return to the neighborhood.

By the time Marlene returned again, saddened and a little heavier, she had to devote more time to work than before, to cement her position in her own bureaucracy, a private one that looked askance at extended leaves for whatever reason. When she and Dorothy met, it was to share coffee or a light dinner and talk about distracting but not involving subjects. Dorothy felt that she was now helping Marlene "process," as the popular magazines put it, her mother's death and the meaninglessness of the work that kept her fed. Of course they spoke of Adam and his situation—they could see him from the window of the café where they habitually met. Marlene had found a phone number where she could occasionally, with great patience, receive an update on Ilse's case. Ilse, it seemed, was accepting of her place in jail, but worried over Adam. The two women began to plan a visit to her, but they never quite settled on a date and time acceptable to both of them and to the bureaucracies of justice as well. However, they came to enjoy their coffee meetings quite a bit, and that became a new routine for the two.

Dorothy often felt a quiet bass line of despair, throbbing below the surface noise of their chat and the sounds of the city around them. When Marlene would go to the counter to order more coffee, or repair to the restroom, Dorothy would stare out the window at Adam sitting cross-legged at his tidy camp on the opposite sidewalk, listening to his radio as the traffic raged between them.

With his short hair and his impassive face, he looked to Dorothy like a monk who had created an island of quiet amid the frenzies that surrounded him. She wondered what being him was like, and whether he might be unhappy. When Marlene returned to the table she attended to her friend and her current sorrows. She never forgot about Adam, but she forgot to worry about him after a few weeks of her new routine.