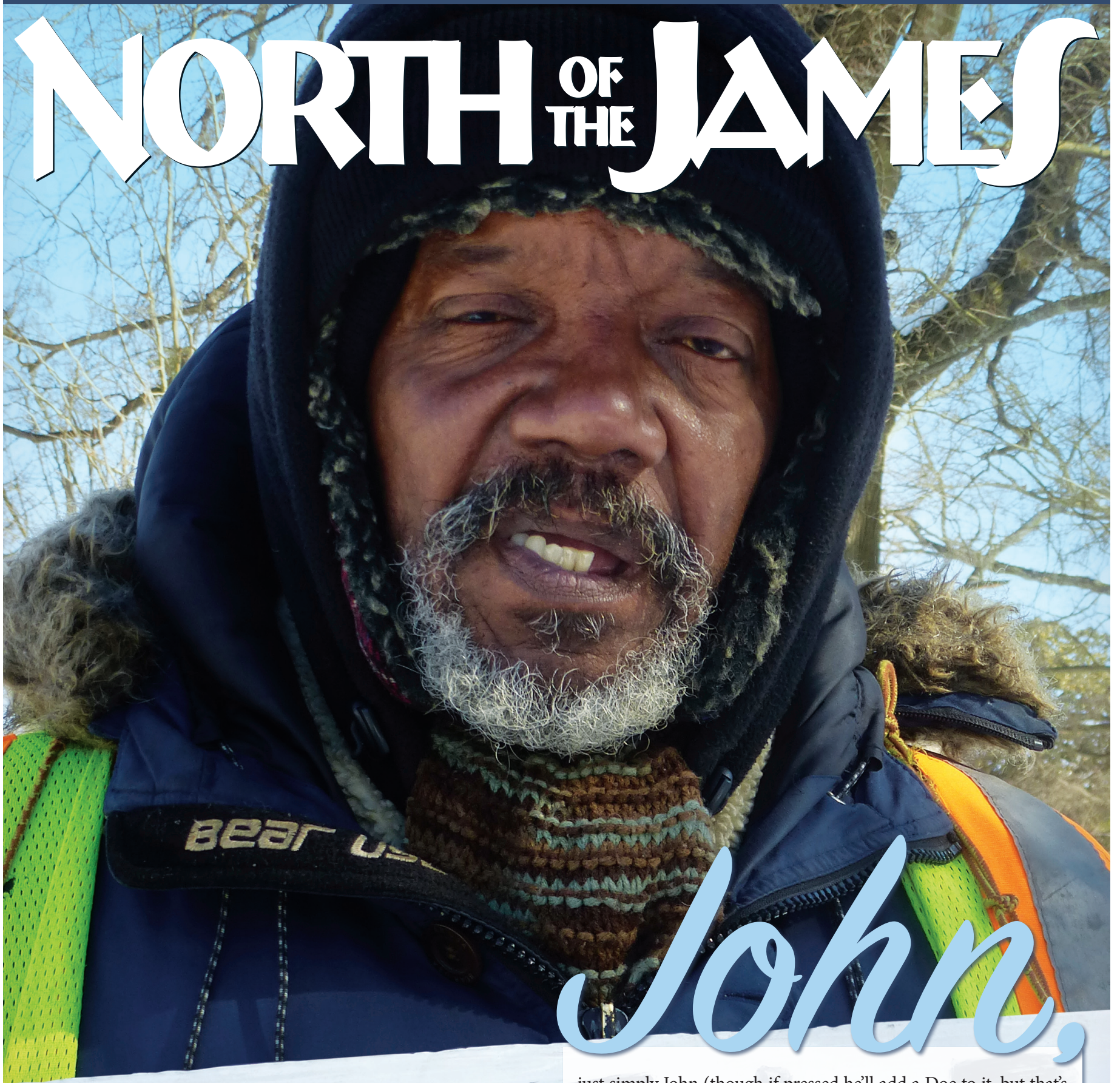


NORTH OF THE JAMES



John.

just simply John (though if pressed he'll add a Doe to it, but that's not his real name), is our neighbor and friend. Like everyone else he works. Seven days a week, too. For years he's worked the corner of Brook and Laburnum. His bike, chained to a nearby tree, bears a sign that reads: LOST ALL PLS HELP WILL WORK. And John holds up a placard that will cause motorists to stop and reconsider their current mood. Sometimes they'll slip John a few bucks or hand him a fist half full of loose change. Small payment to the man who reminded them things might not be as bad as they seem.

continued on page 14



Saint John

OF NORTHSIDE

TO PREP FOR THIS ARTICLE I SPENT TWO NIGHTS OUTSIDE right after the cold weather set in a few weeks back. The first night I made a fire ring in the backyard with loose cobblestones, scavenged fallen limbs from the neighborhood, along the streets of Ginter Park and the median strip on Fauquier, cut the thicker ones with a chop saw and then a built a large fire that I fed throughout the night. I was secure in a sleeping bag but could never really get warm. When you're that cold, you sleep little and then only in abbreviated dozes, stippled with dreams. The longest hours of the night are between two and four, and the coldest hour is right at sunrise. In the morning there was a glaze of frost on my forehead and my hair was stiff. Two nights later I slept in the shed, again in the sleeping bag, but the mercury had dropped off another ten degrees. I lasted until three in the morning at which time the temperature was twelve. That's when I realized I couldn't prep for this piece: I have a safety net; I have a house. John doesn't have this luxury. What he has is a twelve-by-twelve foot garage made of particle board so porous the cold filters through it. He sleeps on a mattress spread across plastic milk crates to keep him above the concrete floor which this time of year is like a sheet of glacial ice.



EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK John stands near the corner of Laburnum Avenue and Brook Road, holding a sign that reads: SMILE IT'S NOT THAT BAD. Just down the street, with its kickstand up in a mound of snow, stands John's mountain bike, his sole means of transportation, one of his few real possessions, of which he says: "My bike is my horse. It's my girlfriend. It's my car. It's

my savior. Not to say it's my God, but it's saved me on more than one occasion."

John has worked this corner for at least four years, maybe more. He stands six foot three and sports a grey beard. His dark brown irises bleed a bit into the

surrounding sea of sclera, which is slightly yellowed like aged parchment. John's eyes never leave yours when you're speaking with him, they move with your eyes, turret-mounted guns trained on a target.

"I've been homeless for a few years," he says. "I don't keep up with numbers. That's not important. That makes you depressed. If you got to say, 'I've been in this situation so long I can't do any better,' then you feel bad, then you think bad and then you physically deteriorate. I don't like feeling bad, looking bad and I don't intend on being in this situation forever but until I can change things I have to do my best to survive. That's part of life. Survival is a daily issue."

It wasn't always this way for John, but something happened thirty years ago, a bad decision he made as a young man, that would brand him for life.

In college, back in the seventies, John's future gleamed bright. He majored in computer programming which was just coming into its own and there was money to be made. John also minored in accounting to make himself even more desirable as an employee. "You work at banks for a while, you work at accounting firms," he says. "I worked for a bookkeeping and tax firm, year round, and it was great."

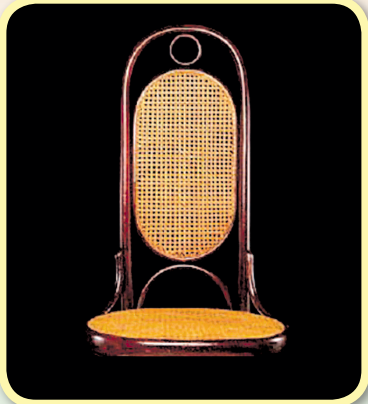
After putting in eight years at the same company, it was sold to a conglomerate and John panicked. He took an unauthorized loan with every intention of paying it back. "I was unable to repay the loan prior to the auditors catching up with me," he says. "It ruined everything. If you have the wherewithal and financial backing you can walk away from anything. But I didn't have the money. My lawyer told me the day of the sentencing, 'If you had the money you could walk away from this.' What I got was an indelible scar."

John served little time, but he carried a suspended sentence with him. "They gave me the installment plan," he says. "A little bit of sentence here and there because of suspended time and anytime you break a fingernail you get a

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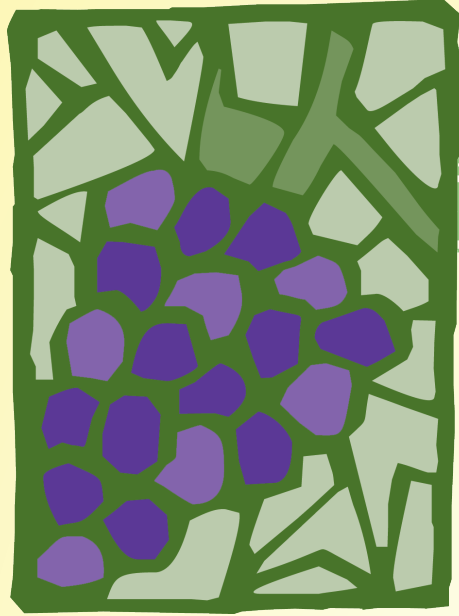
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little more sentence.” So when he was pulled for speeding, he received more jail time. Any minor infraction would land John back in jail. “Each time, they would say, ‘You’ve got to serve three months.’ Just long enough to lose your house, lose your car, lose your job. You pay again and again and again.”

John rubs his forehead with a gloved hand. He shakes his head. “The biggest part is you done worked your way back and you’ve got a job, you done worked your way back you’ve got a car, you got a job and the people on the job like you,” he says. “And then some small thing happens and your house is gone, your car is gone, your job is gone. Everything you had is gone. Again. Again. Again. Again. So hell, you don’t even try no more. I mean after everybody takes everything from you that many times, you say, the hell with it.”

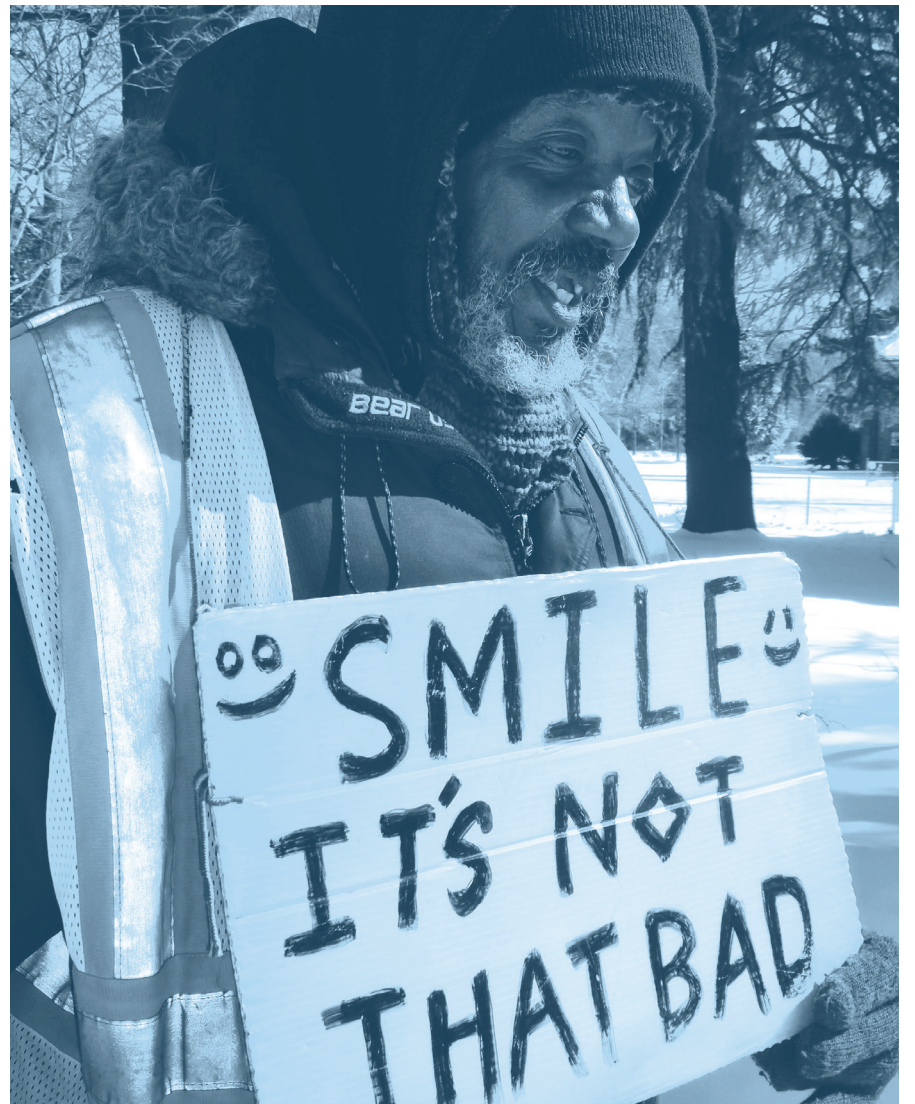
But John didn’t give up. He relocated to another city, out of state, and built a career in traffic engineering. No more financial institutions for him. He reclaimed his life, owned a car, had a job he enjoyed. Then he was summoned back to Richmond to care for aging relatives, an aunt and uncle. He threw himself into it, became their live-in care-

taker. He lived off his own savings. And then both his aunt and uncle passed. “Relatives came out of the woodwork, scraped up everything, left me on the side of the curb with two plastic bags in my hand. I was homeless. Nothing going, nothing coming. I don’t blame the family. They got to survive. They got to take care of themselves.”

John makes his way over to a minivan at the traffic light. His shoes crunch through the snow that is glazed with ice. The woman on the passenger side of the minivan rolls down her window and John thrusts his hand into the warmth, nodding his thanks, then folds the two dollar bills in half and thrusts them in the cargo pocket of the navy blue parka he wears.

When he rejoins me, John says he had no idea that returning to Richmond years ago would end in homelessness. “It was my downfall,” he says. “It was severe because I have that stigma, like a leper. No one wants to hire me because I have a past disease that I cannot wash off. I have an X on me.”

Before John arrives at this corner each day just after noon, he’s generally already worked a job. “People will say



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come over here or come over there and take a look at the job," he says. "I call it a looksee. Sometimes they work out. But sometimes they tell me to ride to Egypt and look at the job and basically they've compared prices with thirteen other people so I'm just giving them an estimate on the job. There're others that tell me come on over I've got work for you and again I ride halfway to Egypt, but before I get to Iraq the job is cancelled."

And he can do pretty much anything. "I'm not above going on top of the house or under the house or painting, cleaning, fixing, or moving," he says. "People look at me as very cheap labor. They work me five hours and give me twenty bucks," he says. "That's less than minimum wage. If you worked five hours moving furniture and they gave you twenty bucks, how would you feel? Not good at all."

Which is why John works this corner. If nothing more, he'll be able to scrape together a few dollars for food and cigarettes—KOOLs. "I can stand here for two hours and get two dollars, or I can stand here for two hours and get twenty dollars," he says. "It just depends on the day, the generosity of the person, the flow of traffic. There are days and

there are times when you just feel like giving up but you can't give up because you got to eat, you got to maintain, you got to look forward to the next day."

As a car pulls over to the curb John goes to work and I leave him to his business.

Three days later I pick John up, strap his bike to the back of my JEEP, and we have lunch at Stir Crazy. As we sit down at the table in the conference room, John removes his coat, a large blue parka with a fur-lined collar. He calls it his bear (the name of the manufacturer) and tells me it is down-filled. "Let me tell you what I wear every day when it's so cold," he says. "I wrap up my core. I have a T-shirt, a shirt, a crew-neck sweater, a lined hooded sweatshirt, a lined Levi jacket and this bear, an overcoat most people can't pick up. I have on three hats, a skull cap, an Alaskan dog-eared cap and then another skull cap on top of that to cut the wind. I have on two pairs of jeans and a pair of thermal underwear. I have on two pairs of socks and an old pair of toe warmers. Yesterday I had them on in that single digit weather and they quit."

When his meal arrives, John peels his

gloves from his hands and invites me to take a close look at his fingers. The skin above his finger joints is the color of cream-lightened coffee, but the fingers are dark black. "I'm approaching frost bite on my hands, on the fingers," John says. "See how the skin is light and changes to what looks like it's been burnt when you get to the fingers. Cold is hardest on the extremities. I also worry about my toes."

He picks up his knife and fork and cuts a thin wedge off the meat and cheese filled wrap on the plate before him. He forks the food into his mouth and chews slowly.

"A lot of people look at me like I'm crazy cause I've been out there for so long," John says. "But I don't have any options. I've applied for jobs, I've circulated my resume."

He takes a few more bites of his wrap, cutting small pieces away with the knife, chewing slowly, savoring the taste. He swallows, dabs his lips with a paper napkin. "There is a routine I have every day," he says "I have to go get kerosene whether I have kerosene in the heater or not. The key is to be able to get it and have it on hand

whether I use it all that night or not. I usually use a gallon to a gallon and a half per night just to stay warm. And I have set so close to it at night that I smell the comforter burning."

John doesn't lie down on these brutally cruel nights. "You have to set up," he says. "If it's that cold you don't go to sleep because you might die in your sleep. If you're cold to the point that you can't feel, when your fingers and your feet get numb, you have to get up and walk. Otherwise you flat going to die, bottom line."

And John knows about death. "I have two children, one living and one deceased," he says. "My daughter was twenty-five when she died of sickle cell anemia. Her mother and myself had the traits and they combined to kill my daughter." He shakes his head. "I died a dozen times when my daughter died," says John. "I told the doctors that they had too much technology to let my daughter die. And I told God to kill me and let my daughter live. And He didn't agree to that so my daughter died and I told God that I was going to talk to Him when I made it to heaven. Acceptance is the hardest thing there is. You lose your child. Nobody can

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swallow that." And then he cuts off another section of the wrap, brings it to his mouth, chews and swallows.

John tells me what his garage is like. "I made a barricade right there beside the heater and I got a few bags of clothes here and a few bags of clothes there and a few condiments in one corner, and a few hygiene things hanging over in another corner," he says. "The heater gives off light and I use candles. I put blankets under me and blankets over me and a coat on top of that. I stay wrapped up in the same clothes I wore that day."

He sometimes wears the same clothes for weeks. "After you can't stand those clothes anymore you change over to some others and you walk those clothes, or they walk themselves, over to the laundromat," he says with a smile.

The winter nights are long, almost unending, and that's when John is completely alone with himself. "Your depression kicks in, your pain kicks in, your anger and your dissatisfaction," he says. "But it's also a time of opportunities. What are my options, what is my next goal, do I have the means to accomplish anything major or should I just maintain basic survival."

Yet the main thing, after the long night, is coming back into the world. "The first thing you got to do is get up out of bed and be functional," John says. "And you have to be acceptable and by that I mean hygiene. As you can see I haven't shaved or gotten a haircut for a while, but on the other side of that I'm not offensive."

So in the icy morning John heats a can of water on top of the Kerosun and bathes himself with a washcloth. "It's painful," he says. "Exposed skin will freeze below thirty-two if it's wet, and then hypothermia will set in."

Once he's finished washing himself, he bundles up and rides his bike over to a nearby McDonald's. "During the winter you cry a lot," he says. "When it's really cold, that's when you drink a four-hour cup of coffee at McDonald's. You get a cup of coffee for two bucks, and you go back and get a refill for a buck, and you go back and get another refill and maybe you can get something off the dollar menu and you go back and get another refill. Forever how long they will tolerate you."

After that he goes to work and later in the day to his corner at Brook and Laburnum. And it really is John's corner. "People have told me that they saw somebody else on my corner one day and they rode right by and didn't give him anything," he says. "They waited for me to return."

John tells me that he would like to get his driver's license back, which he fig-

ures will cost a couple hundred dollars. With the license he feels certain he'd be able to get a full-time job and stop living hand to mouth. "I can build anything," he says. "I've been a general contractor. I can fix anything. I can install an entire heating and air-conditioning system. I just need that chance. More than anything else, I want steady employment."

When we leave Stir Crazy, swatted by the cold just as we cross the threshold, John stops and turns to me. "I was believing that that warmth inside would last forever," he says. "I forgot all about winter." There's no trace of the sun outside and the sky is grey and heavy. A few snowflakes fall, a little sleet like pellets of Styrofoam, and then we're in the JEEP headed over to Laburnum and then east.

During that last interview with John I had been thinking about St. Francis of Assisi, the Fool of God. I considered the story of how he stripped out of his clothes on a cold winter's evening and bedded down for the night in a drift of snow. I've heard different explanations as to why he did this and I never really bought any of them, but after getting to know John, I think I know why Francis did this. He wanted to know the elements and embrace them. He wanted to know what it was like to be without clothes, without shelter, wanted to know what it was like to be at the mercy of the elements, wanted to understand what even the smallest of animals must go through when the weather grows frigid.

Gusts of warm air from the dashboard pelt John and me as I pull over to the curb on North Avenue. I release the Velcro-tipped tethers that secure John's bike to the rack on the back of the JEEP. I lift the bike and hand it over to him. That's when he tells me the story of the birds he has come to know.

"The birds are pretty cool in my area and I feed them and they walk on my house," he says. "At the first hint of daylight the birds come out and sing. That's how it is in the summer and the spring and the fall. I'm kind of in touch with them now. I like the fact that there're no intruders because the birds make noise even though they're the lightest creature you've ever seen. They can walk on top of the snow; they can pretty much walk on water if they want. But they'll make noise and shake tree limbs if they hear somebody coming. There are a couple cats around and I chase the cats away so that they don't try to attack the birds. I don't know if the birds recognize that I do this, but the cats know not to get too close when I'm around. It may sound crazy, but I talk to those birds."

"And they listen," says John. **NJ**