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Junk

She might be thirty, a bit haggard, black T-shirt, black slacks, long dark hair. She's in charge of a baby in a stroller. She's just taken a seat in a park in Footscray, a ramshackle place, scraggly eucalypts, parched grass, rubbish in small windswept heaps. And amongst the rubbish, used sharps, cellophane syringe wrappers, plastic sterile water bottles—enough for one whack. The place has a name—MacNab Park, just a sliver of land, an exit from Footscray Station leading to it. I'm on my way from somewhere or other to the office of Open Family in Nicholson Street, a hundred metres away. That's where I work, at Open Family. This is 1995, twenty-four years ago, so I couldn't swear to what I'd been doing before I came upon this woman. What I

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would be able to swear to, though, is that whatever business I'm engaged in on this sunny Friday will have something to do with exactly what I'm looking at: an addict in a needy state, her priorities completely focused on scoring. And she's got another one of her kids with her to help the business along—a boy of five or six in shorts and a rumpled shirt and thongs. I stand where I am and watch. I know what's going to happen. She sends the kid running off to a dealer. Always dealers in this patch of Footscray, tucked away in the shadows, hands in pockets, vacant expression, but actually very alert. Very. And an addict knows exactly where to find him; every addict beyond a certain level of experience has a preternatural homing instinct. The dealer could be in a bunker twenty metres underground and an addict will sniff him out. Two minutes later, the kid comes running back, one hand clenched. He slips a little plastic baggie into his mum's hand, then stands glancing about: north, south, east and west. The woman has sent the kid because the cops might have the park under surveillance and a kid will attract less attention than an addled woman with a haunted look about her.

As I say, I'm watching as I shuffle along, the noise of the traffic on Dynon Road reaching me as a sustained roar. The woman doesn't pay any attention to me because she can tell, even at a distance, that I'm no threat to her. Addicts know at a glance if they have to be wary of this person or that, and they know who's harmless. I'm glad that she thinks of me as one of the harmless. Because I truly don't wish

her any harm. I wish her exactly the opposite. I wish she had a comfy, middle-class home to go to, and a big Sony Trinitron television, and a welcoming bedroom for her son, and a monster, space-age Westinghouse refrigerator. And not only material stuff, also a husband who provided love and support, for instance; a job that yields a reliable income; a sense of purpose in life. These are just the normal aspirations of most of the adults in Australia, but she can't enjoy them. She's got heroin instead.

Yep, she's got the junk she needs, and she's got a spoon to mix it with the sterile water. She rapidly does what she has to do, puts the flame of a cigarette lighter under the bowl of the spoon, tears open the syringe packet with her teeth, draws up the slurry of dope into the sharp, squeezes her fist, brings up a vein, or what's left of a vein, sinks the needle expertly, sucks up some of her living blood into the syringe, injects. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—whack. She's still sitting. Her head drops onto her chest. The kid stands there passively. The baby in the stroller is quiet.

I walk past her, my head bowed. After all I've seen in my time amongst the hopeless and addled, the broken, the put-upon, the helpless and homeless, those who struggle every day to stay alive, who'd believe I could still feel this much sorrow at the sight of a woman and her junk and her kids? But sometimes it gets to me as if I were witnessing distress of this sort for the first time. The first time. It truly does. I wish there was something I could take to make it all grow blurry—a type of heroin for the onlooker, nothing too

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devastating, just ten minutes of relief. But there isn't. You see it, you bow your head, you mutter a type of all-purpose prayer for the woman and her kids, and you get yourself across the street through the traffic into the Open Family office and make yourself a cup of tea, good strong tea, a bit of milk. And that's it.

But why didn't I intervene? Why didn't I go over to the woman and say: "Listen, you need to take a good, hard look at yourself". Because I don't do that. I never have, and I hope to God I never will. On top of everything else she's dealing with, what would be served by me ripping into her? The time will come when I'll have something to say to her. It won't be censorial. It'll be: "Where're you sleeping tonight, sweetheart? You've got somewhere? Anything to eat, you and the kids?"

A few years ago, Susie Williams and Paula Fox, the wives of Lloyd Williams and Lindsay Fox (don't pretend you haven't heard of them) asked me to take them around some of the meaner streets of the western suburbs and give them a first-hand look at the problems I deal with every day of the year. They'll be making a donation to the 20th Man Fund, the welfare, intervention and outreach organisation I founded way back then, and they want to know more. We go here and there, we get out of the car and walk, I indicate with a nod of my head where they need to direct their gaze, a kid of sixteen down an alley on the nod, a syringe hanging out of his arm; a woman huddled in the gutter, muttering to herself. You get the picture, no need to labour the point.

Susie and Paula, they're not shocked, but they're saddened, concerned, they've got the contacts to do some good, yeah, but they've also got something in their hearts that *makes* them want to do some good, which is the crucial thing. The thing is—and this is what I try to reveal to Susie and Paula—is that the so-called dark side of Melbourne, our city, the concealed side, especially the western suburbs, is not concealed at all, it's not in the shadows, it's out there on display, as plain as the Maccas on the corner, as the Woolies, the pizza parlour, the mums in their four-wheel drives ferrying the kids to school. Maybe we don't stop and gaze down an alley where some kid's doing his junk; maybe we stroll past the woman babbling in the gutter, but the kid and the woman are there, they haven't hidden themselves away. It's just that we say: "But that's not the real Melbourne, that's just a tiny part of something way bigger". What I've been on about for decades is that the kid and his junk, the woman with her scrambled brain are as much a reality as the shiny people of the city.

I'm in the office, I'm at my desk, I've got my cup of tea in my Bulldogs mug. I'm blue, just for the time being. That woman, the kid. I'm asking myself if it ever ends. Each person I find a way to help, two more appear. But I rouse myself—I have to, it's important. I say: "Jesus, Les, it's not footy. You don't win the premiership at the end of the season." You don't win anything. But what I have to believe is that I'm doing some good. And Les, if it wasn't you doing the job, it would have to be somebody else, wouldn't it?

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I mean, bloody hell, someone's got to do it. Cuppa, a little pep talk, I'm okay again. What talents I have, they're exactly right for this job. I'm obstinate, so that's good, isn't it? I'm fairly thick-skinned, and that's important; there are lots of people about the place who want to sink the slipper. And I know bullshit when I hear it—you know, a pious government minister telling you that people have to take responsibility for their own lives, which is true, but not when they've got sexual abuse interfering with their ability to think straight. Okay, I'm the right bloke for the job. I accept that. I've got the pedigree. Some others have a pedigree that comes down to them from parents rich as stink, fancy private school, fabulous tailoring at Henry Bucks. My pedigree is working-class: parents who rolled up their sleeves and ran a fruit and vegetable shop in Braybrook; rough-and-ready government school; tailoring at Denny's Variety Store. I finish the cuppa, take a deep breath and ask Helen, who helps out in the office: "What's next?"