

(Un)settled by Makayla Cinnamon

There's a thin line between having a home and not having a home. Some people come home to a loveless family and distant children, while others go to a home full of love and dinner at the table ready at 7:00 pm every night. Some people call a tent under a bridge a home and others find themselves in a 2,000 sq ft house in a gated community. Some people spend their whole lives trying to find the place that feels like home and others find a home in a small apartment with the love of their life asleep on the couch after a long day of work. The point I'm trying to make here is that a home could be many things to many people and in a different situation some people could have a huge house, but never truly have a home. That is the difference between being settled and unsettled.

When it comes to my home I'm greeted every night by my two dogs, my husband, and our sixteen-year-old brother. We have a couch that reclines, central heating and air, cable, wifi, and food to eat. Every day my husband and I wake up and go to work, while our brother makes his way to school. We are basically your average American family. Except my job is far from average. I work at KARM Thrift Stores which is a non-profit organization that's sole purpose is to provide meals to Knox Area Rescue Ministries, a homeless mission in Downtown Knoxville, every day. KARM provides meals to more than 1,000 people every day and also provides shelter for more than 400 men, women, and children every night. KARM not only provides for the homeless but also provides for those with a home but are having a hard time to paying bills or buying food. KARM also has open courtyards, bathrooms, and a place to store bags for those living on the streets of Knoxville. All of our staff works tirelessly every day to keep our stores and products in the best quality, and for every two dollars that someone spends at our stores they provide a meal to those at our shelter. Knowing all of this, it would be easy for me to go to work and sell some clothes and furniture and think about all the people who I'm working to provide meals for. It would be easy to understand that I'm doing a good thing and to let that fuel my passion for this mission. However, sometimes I find myself trapped behind my register, daydreaming about what I'll do after work, or running around like a crazy person trying to keep the store clean and I understand that I'm missing the mark. I think we all may be missing the mark here.

Prior to working at KARM, I used to believe some of the things said about the homeless and their lifestyle. The words used to define the homeless includes but is not limited too: lazy, druggie, drunk, needy, disgusting, and ultimately useless. It truly is easy to see someone under the bridge in Downtown Knoxville with raggy clothes and mismatched shoes, and believe that all of the above may be true. This stigma around homelessness is actually so strong that I can't honestly remember encountering anyone in my normal life that didn't believe one of the words listed above at some point. And if you are honest with yourself, you have probably fallen victim to believe even one of those things as well. Think about the man standing at the side of the road with a sign that says, "Will work for money". What's your first thought? I know about two years ago my first thought was something like, "But what are they going to buy with the money they are asking for?". This was my thought until the day that I was driving with my now husband and there was a man similar to the one I explained standing in the road by a red light in West Knoxville. As our car moved closer to him; my husband rolled his window down. I immediately began to panic, not knowing what my then boyfriend was going to say to this man, but my husband took his wallet out and handed the man money. I looked at him initially astonished and he told me to look behind me, and then I realized that every car behind us began to also give this man money. He looked at me and explained that there's no way for us to truly know what happened in this man's life that leads him to the middle of the road asking for money. However, it is possible to bless him and in return that could inspire many others to bless him as well. Watching all of those people give to a man that no one was likely to know proved to me that even if people have instinctively believed the cultural stigmas; they are also wired to believe the best in people.

There are very few people I ever met that did not care about the well being of the people around them. We are naturally inclined to help the ones around us going through a hard time with food, money, or even just in friendship. This is why I believe that this stigma around homelessness goes against our natural instinct as people. We are lead to believe that if we give them money that they'll buy drugs or alcohol, but the little voice inside of you is asking about their hunger or their need for a jacket. So when people like my husband gives to that person it

begins a chain of people who, in their heart, want to see the people around them succeed. This is the heart of who we are despite the stigma.

So I stand by my cash register and look down at my clean shoes, my name badge, and my clothes and realize that even though I'm working to provide food and shelter to the homeless; I am not homeless. I have a home, I have a job, I have central heating and air, I don't worry about when my next meal will be, or if I will have a meal at all. So I decided to go to the mission myself in hopes to feel what they feel every day. When you arrive in the area surrounding KARM you are greeted by streets filled with people doing their own things. They're talking, daydreaming, taking inventory of their things, and find a place away from the wind and into the sun. I felt uneasy as I parked my truck but I realized that I was there on a mission to change my own perspective and not to judge the quality of the streets. So I kept walking and imagining who these people were underneath their circumstances. After working up the nerve I stopped at a bench and began a conversation with a man called Joe. Joe is tall, white, with a long beard, and is most likely in his sixties so when I told him why I was there he began to speak on his life.

When Joe was in his mid-twenties he decided to reevaluate his life; he had no wife, children, or close family, and he knew it was time for a change. He decided to sign up for the United States Army and after over twenty years of service, he retired. Once he got back to Tennessee he realized there was nothing waiting for him here he had no home, family, or job. His work skills were slim to none and since he was in his late forties and riddled with PTSD; his attempted job search was basically unsuccessful. He found solace in a group of veterans in similar situations and began a special family of his own. To this day they all travel together and since Joe is older than the others he has taken a grandfather type role in this family. He takes care of them all and makes sure that everyone has what they need and that no one goes without. He admitted to me that he knew from the beginning that he could request help from the government, but at the end of the day he signed up to serve our country, and not for his country to have to serve him. I could tell that Joe felt like a nuisance to our country, but I knew that I would want to help a person like him as would any other person who respects the people who help our country remain free.

After my conversation with Joe, I went out in search of more people. I felt myself grow more and more eager to know the people who are so easily labeled by society and I felt myself writing

new labels like: in need, hopeful, grateful, at peace, and unsettled. I spoke to a man from Detroit who lost his job as a truck driver after his truck broke down in Tennessee. He didn't have the money to make it back home and lost his house and ruined his credit. His family barely has enough money to make ends meet in Detroit, so he was left stranded in Tennessee. He took shelter at one of KARM's facilities and that is where he stayed. I then met a man who had a makeshift bed out of blankets, his clothes laid out neatly, and a broom that he used to sweep the dirt off the spot that he stayed at. He expressed to me that he may not have much, but it was all he has and he intends to take care of it. This encounter made me immediately regret not making my bed that morning. Time seemed to pass so quickly as I learned about the people on the streets of Downtown Knoxville, and after speaking to a few more people it was time for me to go home. As I was driving away it clicked with me that I had a home to go to, but the people I encountered that day would stay where they are just like a photograph.

I pull into my driveway and glance up at my name badge hanging on my rearview mirror; it will never look the same to me. I go inside and I made my bed before sitting on the couch with my laptop and begin to write these words that you're reading right now. After this experience, everything seems to look much different to me now. My TV, iPhone, MacBook, fridge full of food, clothes, ten pairs of shoes, microwave, and a bed is all a privilege to me. All it could have taken was a small circumstance that could have put me right there in the same place as Joe and all the others I talked to today. I realize that they're no different than me, or than anyone else for that matter. The only thing that separates me from them is that they're in a different place in their life, but aren't we all. I am not the same as you, you are not the same as your best friend, and your best friend is not the same as Joe. I have a home and Joe does not; but that doesn't make him lazy, a druggie, a drunk, needy, disgusting, or useless. Because it's not what we have that defines who we are and it's not where we live that defines our value as a human.

It is good and bad in everything in this world, and history shows that we let the bad shine over the good when it comes to our ways of thinking. I'm not blind to the fact that there are homeless people out there that are in prostitution, on drugs, refusing to work, and drinking from the start of the day to the end; but there are also disabled veterans, people who lost their jobs, teenagers with no families, and women running from abusive relationships. We can't continue to let the people

who are doing bad things shape our view of the people who are hopeful and searching for restoration around every corner. We can't continue to give into societies stigma and automatically discredit situations that we don't understand. We have to believe that life can change for the people in Downtown Knoxville; just like our lives will naturally change as time goes on. It's time that we, as humans, decide to change the words around homelessness and refuse to let the bad things we hear outshine the good things that we know in our hearts. After this experience, I now realize that being unsettled just means that you are continuously moving or changing, but don't we all fall under that definition, just like Joe.