



CAN'T TAKE A NIGHT OFF

by Joseph Clark

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For several years, gentle Joe Clark was among the homeless of Los Angeles and San Diego. Drunks urinated on him when he slept in Skid Row doorways. Awake, attempts to start conversations sometimes ended in a beating followed by sexual abuse.

Clark couldn't fight back. He was mentally ill, a paranoid schizophrenic who couldn't afford Stelazine and Xanax. Voices inside his head said he was being punished. "You're a bad seed", they scolded.

To Clark, a runaway from a dysfunctional family, it certainly seemed that way. At 15 he underwent treatment at the Colorado State Hospital. A few years later he was in San Diego, panhandling tourists in Balboa Park and dressing in clothes he found on the beaches.

In 1984 he hitchhiked to Los Angeles and Skid Row. After many assaults he became obsessed with safety. When he couldn't find it, he decided to stay awake forever.

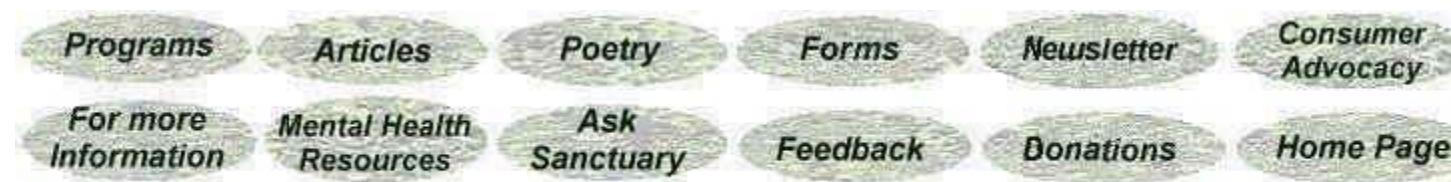
There was a time when I considered myself a survivor of mental illness. Now I am an achiever who happens to have mental illness. In the constant battle to define myself, I am American-African, overweight by nature, survivor of mental illness, and a human being still searching for my life. Born as Joseph Wisdom Clark III, known as Joe to most I meet, I left the hospital right after my sixteenth birthday, angry and alone, to face what life had for me. Still having that voice in my head screaming "You're a bad seed" and "You'll never be anything" I ran to what awaited me next. This anger that I was holding onto only helped feed my illness. I was running from the demons that screamed, "So much for the bad seed you are". I believed they must be right. What I could not see at the time was that I had done nothing bad, even as that hopeful child, that could warrant me to withdraw and to run away from all the sadness. My homelessness started at sixteen. I didn't see myself as being homeless until seven years ago. I found that Skid Row allows one the chance to hide away from feelings, life an outsider. Skid Row was my hospital. I preferred it's lifestyle over that of being in an institution. It is something that is still very important to me. Out of my 35 years of living, my running lasted eight to nine years; six to eight of those years right here on Skid Row. My hiding from the voices was also a survival technique that helped keep me out of the hospital. And Skid Row is a place in which it doesn't matter if you are different. Skid Row welcomes the different, everyday. It costs to be on Skid Row. The illness intensifies, isolation increases, but there are no hospitals and people to tell you that you are a bad seed. You are tolerated and accepted here. When one cannot be accepted by family or friends there is always a Skid Row, somewhere. In the summer of '85 I came across a group of people that had a way of looking at things a little different from most mental health agencies and clinics. It was LAMP; Los Angeles Men's Place. The people at LAMP did something different; they asked me what I wanted to do and be. I took hold of this chance to make changes and remake myself. Meds from County Mental Health helped, yet it was the concern of the LAMP staff and

guests, that saw me through it all. During this time I discovered that mental illness is not an excuse for acting out. I discovered there are other ways to handle problems than running away from the sadness and screaming at the voices to "leave me alone". I have learned many things that I try to share with others even now that I have the responsibility of operating a program. During that first summer I wrote of my experience through poetry. The language t times, is critical and raw. It's images are to provoke feelings and thoughts that hopefully bridge a gap that exists between us. The world is, I hope, coming around to the place where those of us who have mental illness will not have to go to the skid rows to live quality lives. I will do what I can to make it so.

JOSEPH CLARK is manager of LAMP Lodge, a new housing program for the homeless, operated by The Los Angeles Men's Pace of Skid Row.

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