

# STORIES

## 19 Hope Eternal

Sean LeBlanc

There is nothing I fear more than being homeless again. I grew up in a household of fear, and have survived several forms of abuse. I have been addicted to opiates. I have been incarcerated. I have had to fight for my literal survival on a lot of different occasions. I have hitchhiked across America, and lost everyone I loved at one point. My life has had more than a fair share of frightening moments, but nothing scares me nearly as much as homelessness. Even now, when I sleep I cannot dream of anything happy. All my dreams are terrifying and the recurring theme is memories from when I was without a home—without a place to hope, a place where I could feel safe. Life is difficult enough and without a place to stay, without ever feeling safe, life is not only empty and lonely, but terrifying. When one has nowhere to go, how can one really get anywhere?

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Growing up, ‘home’ was a place where I was always in fear, never knowing what state of misery my parents were to share with me that day. I remember

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never being at ease, never really feeling safe. Safety is very important to me; I left home in search of it at the age of 14. The first place I lived after moving out of my parents' place was provided by the government—though instead of offering me safety, this 'emergency housing' was where I lost my proverbial innocence after being sexually assaulted the first night by the housing staff themselves. That was the absolute end of my turning to Canada's 'social safety net' for any type of assistance. The abodes in which I resided after that were far from ideal, but at least they were places I could call my own. Having my own place was always (and is) paramount; a place where I can at least be relatively safe and where I have some control.

I spent the formative years of my life on Canadian Armed Forces bases. My father was a military policeman and a violent alcoholic; my mother was a hard-working seamstress. I never really felt like myself during this period of my life. Fear is a very powerful weapon. The one place I have always felt safe is the ball field, and with one great exception, it is the only source of happy memories. The exception is a set of grandparents who loved me, but with my father's job in the military we were always so far from where they lived in small-town Nova Scotia. We would see them annually for a week or so. That time was the only reprieve I experienced, for my parents would leave us in relative peace when my beloved grandparents were around. I got so much from them, but nothing more so than honour and peace.

'Home'—Mormons, soldiers, families, hippies, tents, abandoned schools, rooming houses and my school shower room. I was expending so much energy as a teen just trying to find an okay place to stay, how I was able to attend school and actually do okay was a minor miracle after night upon night of restlessness. Though I was often without shelter, I never considered myself homeless—even the term eluded me—I was just without a place to stay. The folly of youth I guess—I was just so relieved to not have to put up with my father that sleeping in the woods without even a blanket in November was not such a bad experience. Being without shelter is exhausting, but I was a pretty energetic child (and remain so to this day). It wasn't easy, but as a teen I was ignorant enough to consider it an adventure of sorts.

Despite receiving no help from anyone, I was able to eventually attend and even finish high school. I graduated and, having spent my last year of school living with my grandparents, it was the first time since I was a young child that I had lived in a home of happiness. They were incredible people and I had an incredible year at school living with them and working part-time. I was succeeding in all levels of life: I was in love with an incredible woman, had a job I adored, had been offered a spot at a local university and I had a great circle of activist friends. For the first time in a long time, I was genuinely happy. Being young and restless, and even a little wild at heart, I to further my adventures and hitchhike to San Francisco. I had always wanted to visit the City Lights banned books store there, which was owned by a favourite poet of mine, Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

I guess youth forgives many things, and while the naiveté seemed to dull the threat of, or actual homelessness itself, no youth should ever have to go through the homelessness that I experienced. And while I didn't fear homelessness as a youth, when I became scared was when I got older and the realization came over me that I, once as normal as normal could be, was now homeless. Who would have ever thought?

The feeling that overcomes you when you finally realize, "I have no place to go and it scares the daylight out of me" is not easy to describe. It is absolute emptiness, this lost, far-away feeling of not just overwhelming depression, but of hopelessness. I remember once being evicted for owing \$32 in back rent. I was sent an invoice owing over \$900, which I paid in full. The landlord hid the \$32 in fees from me, and I was shocked to have a sheriff show up one day to evict me over what I had thought was paid rent. It is an awful feeling, sitting on your doorstep with all of your belongings on the porch with nowhere to go because some slumlord wants you out so that he can rent the place to his teenage girlfriend. I mean, what would you, and what could you do? I remember wanting to cry but I was just too blown away to be able to do so.

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12 men in your shelter room make it very hard to sleep. In a normal dorm of 12, you will get three who are extremely mentally ill, three who are alcoholics, a youth running from horrors similar to those I fled, two working men who can't catch a break, two opiate addicts and the 12th would be me, who

could have easily fit into any of these categories. A lot of the problematic substance abuse in shelters is because one almost has to be intoxicated just to deal with all of the drama that the homeless face daily: violence, oppression, condescending attitudes, a horrid diet and worst of all: nothing to do. There are so many things that can mess with your day in such a place.

Shelters really are accessed for 24 hours, and that prevents those already there from sleeping. I used to alter my schedule, which is to try to sleep from 5pm until 11pm when everyone else was out or down watching television, reading, what have you. This was my life, or rather my existence. Public libraries and malls are your best friends, as they are for many of our homeless; they are places to at least stay warm. Can you imagine waking up at 7am

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and having nowhere to go all day? I know many of you will say: “Why not go to work?” If there were actual jobs available then most of us who could go would. The only work usually available is through labour agencies—a salesperson in a small office with a phone and computer who solicits work for homeless or vulnerably housed people, taking half of what they earn and a lot of times not even paying at all. Many people go by the shelters to get workers for whatever dangerous and debilitating tasks they need, promise them a chance and then disappear when payday comes around. It is so frustrating when one works all week for nothing, and I mean work: really dirty, physical work that most Canadians would never consider doing and for wages that are illegal. Workplace safety is a misnomer in these jobs, it does not exist. I myself have done backbreaking labour for weeks through a homeless shelter and had not received a cent. Things like this make it really hard to stay positive. Homelessness basically strips your self-worth, and that is a really hard thing to get back.

Waking to the taste of blood in my mouth is not just very unpleasant, but rather scary. I had woken up in some very precarious situations before, but never before had I been awakened by someone I did not know punching me in the face. Waking up in a shelter is always unpleasant; I remember most mornings that I absolutely dreaded waking up, almost willing myself back to sleep for just a few minutes reprieve, a little while longer to keep the world at bay, the world I have tried to avoid at any cost. It was Danny who was my assailant, and despite my discomfort I fought for all I was worth. He attacked me because I denied him a wash (residue from injecting

drugs left in spoon) from the morphine I had done the previous night. It was going to be a rough enough day, I did not need to give away the only thing that was going to get me out of bed this dark morning. Well that and the fact the police would be coming if I was not out of bed by 8am. So I struggled to get up, but get up I did and straggled to the washroom to do what I had to do to get the day started. The morphine I had left would get me by until noon if I were lucky. I had to get well and then get some cash. All I could think of was how tiresome this life had become. In the shelter bathroom, I prepared my drugs. There was always a line up to inject in there, and injecting beside someone who is having a bowel movement is not a pleasant thing any time, but especially not first thing in the morning. I was lucky that staff allowed us to informally use these facilities because injecting outdoors is even more unpleasant than injecting next to one doing their bathroom business. I am sure it was not pleasant for them either, but what I was doing every morning in there was as essential to starting my day as what they were doing to start theirs! There comes a time in opiate addiction where one is using opiates not to get high but for sheer normality—just to feel normal— and I was way past that point.

Doughnuts for supper again. Homelessness tests one's strength daily, but even more so for those on a restricted diet, like me as a vegetarian. A bag of doughnuts for supper after a syringe of morphine (or three) for dessert. There is no such thing as healthy living at a shelter. The food for the most part is rancid, and you are surrounded by every sort of illness with people stacked like books in a library. It is almost impossible to improve one's lot in life, and seems to me that it is simply existing, as opposed to living, that the government wants for us.

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Privacy is also not an option at a shelter. One rarely has a chance to collect one's thoughts when always surrounded by other people. There is always pressure when surrounded by addiction, violence, mental illness—most times it feels almost hard to breathe! It is very tiring and time-consuming when one has nowhere to go and nothing to do with their day and worst of all, self-defeating. You wake up with very little self-worth and then a day that offers no opportunities adds to that feeling of worthlessness.

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There are, for sure, some very well intentioned, albeit overwhelmed, staff at homeless shelters. The problem is that the work is so overwhelming and transitory: you develop a relationship with a staff member and before you know it, they are off to bigger and better things. For the most part, work in the homelessness field is a 'starter job,' and those that are good at this work soon get a better job, one with less stress and more pay. 'Overwhelming' is a perfect way to describe both sides of the ledger, service users and providers. Providers are overwhelmed by the breadth of the problem and the limited resources they have, and shelter users are overwhelmed by the chaos and insecurity that shelter life delivers. How does a 22-year-old, fresh out of school, deal with all of the violence, addiction and mental illness so prevalent in shelters? He is pretty well set up to fail.

There are several models of shelters, and frankly, 90% of them suck. I remember one place in Kingston that actually was like a home, and that is only because the awesome staff there allowed us to treat it as such. It was a house with only six beds, and we had free reign of the kitchen! Sadly though, one was only allowed there for five days a month, which is not enough time to get on one's feet. It is like most services for the homeless: if it is good, it is limited and doesn't last.

"There is no homelessness in Ottawa. There are no drugs in Ottawa either." That was what I believed when I came to our nation's capital. I was very sadly mistaken upon arrival. I started out in the Salvation Army, and a battle it was for sure! In most communities, the 'Sally Ann' is the only place to go when you are homeless. But where are the government services, the social safety net that failed me as a kid and as an adult?

I was homeless for over seven long years. I used a lot of drugs and just floated through my 'life.' Thankfully I eventually reached a point where I was just simply sick and tired of being sick and tired, and lucked out big time when I started to visit a local community health centre (Oasis in Ottawa) at the right time. They met me where I was at and gave me the tools I needed to begin to rebuild my life slowly. I began to remember what hope felt like, and it felt very good. We live in an amazing country and we certainly have the capability to provide everyone with some sort of adequate housing. I

myself am still in my little 12x8 room, but it is my room, and I can lock the door and go and get something essential that we all need: peace. It is a beautiful thing to be able to dream again and not have all the dreams become nightmares. I still have my issues and still have a lot of work to do, but I at least have some measure of peace, and that is something we all deserve. With this growing feeling of peace comes hope, and I ultimately hope for the day when we no longer need to be writing stories like this, when adequate housing is recognized as a right as opposed to a privilege that escapes a large part of our community. Hope is beautiful, and may my hope that we all are housed properly be realized sooner than later. Until then, 'dream a little dream with me...'



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Sean LeBlanc

After surviving a series of personal tragedies and an addiction to opiates, Sean LeBlanc founded DUAL (Drug Users Advocacy League) to actively promote the human rights of people who consume drugs and is an example of the essential need to empower those with lived experience. DUAL is based in Ottawa where Sean is also the co-principal investigator of the largest community cohort study in Ontario, called PROUD (Participatory Research in Ottawa Understanding Drugs). PROUD interviewed over 850 drug consumers and provided HIV testing for over 575 people! Sean is a Maritimer, a lover of Punk Rock, dancing badly, literature, & the Red Sox. He likes spending time with his lady friend & watching classic films. His favorite thing is helping drug consumers find happiness & good health!

#### Birth of DUAL

A personal story of trauma and recovery, and advocacy...

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/rlFeMIIN-yI>