

Recounting a life at the corner of hard times and end times

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

An indigent white family of four resides in their van, their only home.

They have arrived in the teeming city of San Francisco and are soon navigating a network of free meals and food banks.

Safe and legal spots to park their vehicle are not an easy find.

There is little privacy. Locating clean places to wash and use a toilet become a part of their daily excursions. Having once had a modest but honest-to-goodness house and what seemed a secure place in the world, now their collective life has become a painful descent into confusion and uncertainty.

Sixteen-year-old Abigail Parker narrates the story of her family's frenetic journey from their small town in North Carolina to California's metropolis by the bay. Their hometown was dying: "All the big stores were gone, leaving behind a collection of flea market-style booths that were as aimless as the people who still shopped there."

Her father, Dale, has lost his job at a local plant. He is a kindly dad and a religious man. Dale, his wife Kat, Abigail and her twin brother Aaron are regular parishioners at the First Methodist Church. As household financial reserves steadily run lower, both her parents borrow what little money the twins had managed to accumulate. Abigail had saved about \$500 from babysitting jobs. "That was before we got rid of cable and internet. Before the yellow late-payment warnings began showing up at our front door and we started getting bags of groceries from our church."

In the midst of their travails in North Carolina, Dale becomes obsessed by the

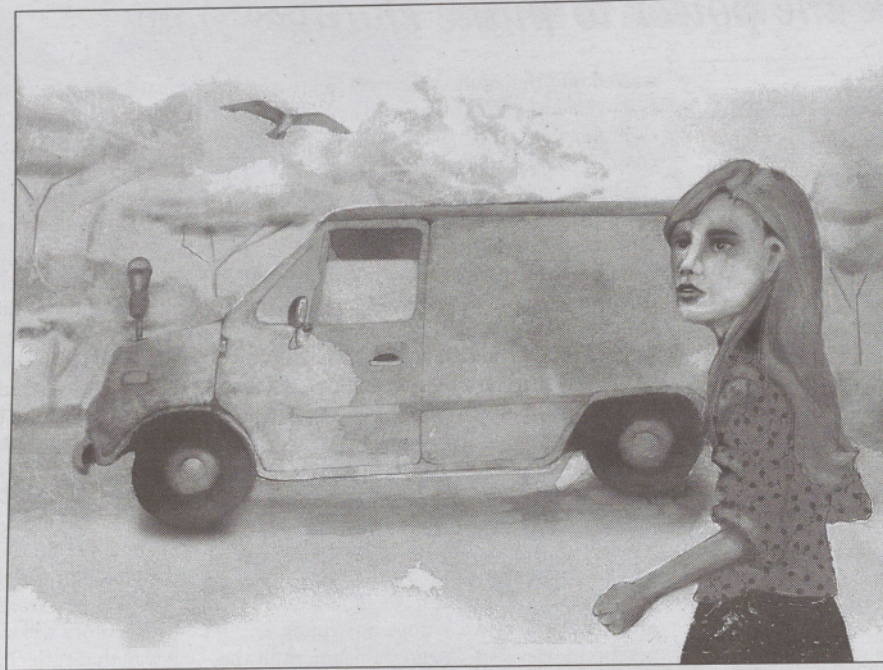


ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS

apocalyptic rants of a radio preacher known as Brother John. With his personal and financial world unraveling, Dale is ripe for eschatological visions. The preacher, who talks of "The End Times," predicts this sinful world is soon coming to an end. The urgent message of finality provides Dale spiritual comfort, a reassurance that no matter how dire life has become, everything is in God's hands.

He becomes immersed in the belief that the unpleasantness of the present will be abruptly transformed, for according to Brother John a new beginning awaits the faithful in the near future. The tantalizing preachment ignites in Dale a single-minded recklessness. He decides that it is time to

sell the family home, rid themselves of unnecessary possessions and join the preacher's congregation in San Francisco. Kat defers to her husband's decision and the twins become involuntary sojourners in a dubious pilgrimage.

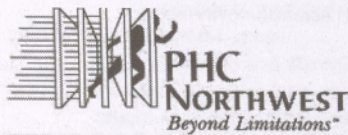
"No Parking at the End Times" is Bryan Bliss' first novel. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Seattle Pacific University and now lives with his family in Minneapolis. In a recent interview, Bliss expressed his sensitivity regarding the issue of class: "I grew up poor and can still feel the injustice of not being able to have the things kids want — toys, basketball shoes, all that. That definitely comes out in my fiction. It's not that I don't care about wealthy kids,

or think that having shoes and toys makes you a happier person, but the struggle of being a kid/teenager compounded with economic realities is something I want to highlight."

Instead of creating chaos for his family due to alcoholism or drug addiction, Dale's irrationality stems from his fall into unquestioning religious fanaticism. It is a different form of compulsion but no less destructive to this family's cohesion and affection. Whether Brother John is simply a smooth con-man or an eloquently deluded lunatic, Dale is a willing captive to the preacher's theology. And his wife Kat goes along. Abigail comes to suspect that Brother John is a fraud. She laments that "everything I've ever known is disappearing and I can't stop it." Meanwhile, Aaron's anger is simmering. He has taken to leaving the van at night to hang out with some homeless kids he has befriended. Aaron's resentment of his parents is palpable. He says to his sister: "I want to get the hell out of here. As soon as possible." He invites Abigail to join him in the effort to get back to North Carolina. It is a desperate proposition with tenuous prospects.

The book's genre is young adult, but it deals poignantly and convincingly with adult themes. The disappointment, discomfort and humiliation that individuals and families experience when homelessness overwhelms their lives are limned realistically in this tale. Though fiction, it is as relevant as today's headlines that detail the myriad issues of growing homelessness in Portland and elsewhere throughout our nation.

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